THE IRISH IN POST-WAR ENGLAND: EXPERIENCE, MEMORY AND BELONGING IN PERSONAL NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION 1945-69

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

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# List of contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of contents</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author’s Declaration</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copyright Statement</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: the dialogics of subjectivity</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Origins and orientations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- From ‘segregation’ to ‘assimilation’</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ‘A people unheeded’: the ‘invisibility’ of ‘Irish identity’ and the ‘ethnic turn’</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ‘Un-focusing’ optical metaphors: deconstructing ‘invisibility’</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Oral history, migration and the dialogic of subjectivity</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Horizons of possibility, sites of memory</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. Disparity at the origin: leaving and the construction of emigrant selves</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The body of the emigrant</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ‘Exile’ and ‘economic necessity’: narratives of ‘having to go’</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Narratives of escape and self-realisation: quest structures and memories of leaving</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Dis/composing the emigrant self</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Difference and disparity</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. Lives in re/Construction: Irish men’s memories of work in the British construction industry</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The derided but mobile Paddy</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ‘the first chance I got I went outside’</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ‘the pickaxe, the shovel and the graft’</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ‘the luck of the game’</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ‘you weren’t brought up with that. You had to learn that from yourself’</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ‘when you’re with them long enough’</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ‘the money was good, the work was hard’</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- ‘the Irish round here’ 141
- Conclusion: towards a ‘communal imaginary’ of the Irish in Britain 145

Chapter 3. Ambivalent horizons: competing narratives of self in Irish women’s memories of pre-marriage years in England 150
- Quests for un/certainty 150
- Redemption story 153
- Opportunity, self-expression and the return of the past 166
- A cautionary tale 174
- Ambivalent relations 185

Chapter 4. Re/negotiating ‘suspicion’: exploring the construction of self in Irish migrants’ memories of the 1996 Manchester bomb 189
- Coming under ‘suspicion’ 189
- Memories of the Manchester bomb 192
- Conclusion: re-thinking ‘The Troubles’ and ‘Irish identity’ 214

Conclusion: the migrant self in conversation 219
- Migrancy, ‘identity’ and discursive mediation 219
- Dis/integrating the Irish migrant self 224
- ‘Muting’, the ‘cultural circuit’ and the communal memory of the Irish in Britain 229
- The future of ‘the Irish in Britain’ 235

Appendix 1 238
Appendix 2 239
Bibliography 242
  1) Archival sources and official publications 242
  2) Newspapers and periodicals 243
  3) Prescriptive literature 244
  4) Novels, plays and poetry 244
  5) Autobiographies and memoires 245
  6) Film, TV and documentaries 246
  7) Published books and articles 246
  8) Unpublished theses, reports and lectures 261
  9) Websites 262

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Abstract

The Irish in Post-war England: experience, memory and belonging in personal narratives of migration 1945-69.

Scholars of Irish migration in twentieth-century Britain have tended to present migrants’ experiences through two opposing stories about ‘assimilation’ and the struggle to preserve an ‘Irish ethnic identity’ in the face of official attempts at repression. Based on in-depth analysis of oral history interviews conducted by the author between 2009 and 2011, with eight Irish migrants who settled in England between 1945-69, this thesis suggests that individual migrant experiences resist simple incorporation within this dichotomy. It does so through exploration of the diverse ways the psychic and the social intersect in the production of migrant subjectivities within specific contexts. The thesis argues that such subjectivities were not coherently constituted or unified through a single discourse on ‘identity’, but that there were always multiple, often contradictory, possibilities available for self-construction within the different spaces migrants inhabited, in both the past and present. Through investigation of the distinct ways different respondents constructed themselves in relation to four sites of memory, namely leaving Ireland, pre-marriage years in the post-war British city, the construction industry, and ‘The Troubles’, the thesis shows how migrants negotiated and drew upon a diverse range of subject-positions in order to constitute themselves within their personal accounts of settlement. This inter-subjective process was conditioned by the possibilities and constraints of the various local, communal, and institutional discourses which mediated the lived realities of migration to Britain and which were available in the present for self-construction. But it was affected too by the active if usually unconscious workings of memory. How migrants interacted with available discourses was never predetermined but was shaped by on-going dialogues between public and private, past and present, there and here. Within each narrative these dialogues formed parts of individually specific strategies of ‘composure’ through which subjects, with varying degrees of success, sought to render their experiences into a coherent, integrated whole. The thesis argues that Irish migrant ‘identity’ in post-1945 England was never the finished product of a linear process of ‘assimilation’ or simple determinants like national origin, class, or religion. It is more usefully approached as a variable set of dialogic processes, as part of which migrants made investments in a diverse range of discourses in a bid to formulate self-affirming understandings of the migration experience.
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Dedication

To Tom, who left today, and Sarah, who told stories

27/09
The research for this thesis would not have been possible without the financial support of the Economic and Social Research Council, which has funded the project since 2008.

Nor would it have been possible without the participation of the interviewees who agreed to tell me about their lives as migrants in England. To these people, who took time out of their lives to answer my questions, and who provided me with source material of incomparable richness, I offer my deepest thanks.

In helping me locate respondents, I owe a debt of thanks to Carmel at Manchester Community Care, and to Patrick Doyle, friend and enjoyer of fine ales. In helping me with archival sources, I owe thanks to the staff at London Metropolitan University, who allowed me to rummage freely through the materials housed in the Archive of the Irish in Britain, and who graciously accepted my constant stream of requests for photocopies. A special thanks to Dr. Nicole McLennan who not only helped me track down sources on the Catholic church, but supplied me with a transcript of her important archival work on the county associations in London. For similar reasons I owe thanks to the staff at Liverpool University Library, who spent the best part of three days patiently photocopying articles from *The Bell*.

Many people have helped me develop the ideas on which this thesis is based. My deepest debt of gratitude is to my panellists and supervisor, Dr. Charlotte Wildman, Dr. Till Geiger, and Prof. Penny Summerfield. Over the course of the last four years they have been patient, supportive and wise, encouraging me to explore, yet reigning me in when I have strayed beyond the bounds. Their sharp, incisive comments have contributed to the shaping of this thesis in innumerable ways, and for the time, effort and imagination they have invested I am eternally grateful.

Thanks are also due to Dr. Liam Harte and Dr. Lawrence Brown, both of whom helped with reading material during the early stages, and to Dr. Selina Todd, who read and gave sharp
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Catherine’s family, my family over here, have been generous, encouraging and kind, consistently offering support and succour. I am indebted to you all for the warmth you have shown. A special thanks to Sarah, who, at the same time as being a wife, mother and attending to her own job, found time to proof-read parts of this thesis. I wish I could manage time as efficiently.

While further away geographically, my own family, Mum, Dad, Granny, Denise and Dave, have never been far from my thoughts these last four years, even if I’m bad at returning calls. As usual they have provided unconditional support, and I don’t know what I’d do without them. I know how lucky I am.

And finally to Catherine, because this is where I return to. No one means more.
Introduction: the dialogics of subjectivity

Founded on the rupture between a past that is its object, and a present that is the place of its practice, history endlessly finds the present in its object and the past in its practice.¹

Origins and orientations

In Northern Ireland, the 1980s and 90s were years in which discussion about questions of national identity, religion and political allegiance was intense. As well as some of the worst atrocities of ‘The Troubles’, these years saw the emergence of all-party peace talks, leading eventually to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Growing up in a small town in Tyrone during this period, as I reached adolescence I remember becoming increasingly aware of this political saturation, both at home and in school, and of course within the wider media. I also remember, however, coming to view this saturation in terms of limitation and constraint. This, I think, had something to do with where I lived and the religious composition of the peer group I became part of around the age of 13. The largely Protestant housing estate that I lived on backed onto and adjoined another, largely Catholic, housing estate. Up until around the time of going to secondary school this spatial arrangement tended to foster a social segregation in playtime: we played football on our streets, and the Catholic boys did likewise on theirs, and there was little or no interaction between the two groups. This changed as a result of shared adolescent experiments with cigarettes and alcohol, and later, recreational drugs and music-making.

Around about the same time members of both groups discovered that the cut-through path linking the two estates, known to us as ‘dump hill’, was a strategically good place to smoke and drink because the bend in the path meant that parents and neighbours could not observe what was going on, yet we could see investigators approach from both ends of the path well in advance of them reaching us. During the summer holidays the hill became a shared rendezvous point, and by the beginning of term the two groups had effectively merged. Over the next five years the group came to take priority over school-friends as a focus of

socialising, and what had initially been an unspoken agreement not to talk about religion and politics eventually gave way to a more rebellious attitude of denigration towards political leaders on both sides of the political divide, men who became for some of us objects of ridicule and satire. Although shaped by the wider sectarian culture in which it was embedded, the group constituted an in-between space in which we could contest some of its most divisive effects, while fashioning ourselves through shared adolescent practices whose structuring ideals and logics had little, or seemed to have little, to do with being Irish or British.

Looking back at this period now, it occurs to me that the construction of this space, at least from my standpoint, may have involved a process of splitting whereby confusing and difficult questions about identity, nationality and politics were denigrated and devalued, while other aspects of the self untainted by association with these themes were idealised. My choices of London or Glasgow, rather than Belfast or Coleraine, as prospective university cities when filling out my UCAS forms may also have been conditioned by this, in that, at an unconscious level, I understood my migration out of Northern Ireland as a further moving away from those divisive questions about identity and towards some kind of urban cosmopolitanism where such things were not relevant. If this was the plan, it didn’t work out too well. Going to Glasgow University in 2002 certainly supplied access to new social worlds, but it involved too the new phenomenon of being constantly identified as “Irish” by others who did not themselves identify as “Irish”. This was unsettling, not only because my Protestant background had furnished me with few ideas about just what kind of “Irish” I might be, but because my experiences growing up in Cookstown contradicted and conflicted with the sharp, politicised divisions brought into play by such designations, so that terms like Irish/British, unionist/nationalist or Catholic/Protestant could be experienced as an external imposition and a simplification. When taxi drivers, frequently the boldest of specialists on Anglo-Irish relations, would ask whether I was a Catholic or a Protestant, it was difficult to satisfy the expectations implicit in the question without a loss of authenticity.

The effect of such questions was not so much to bring me to a realisation about my ‘true’ identity, as to alert me to the fact that migration to Britain involved one, or me at any rate, in complex negotiations with issues of meaning and identity, negotiations which I had given
little thought to when choosing where to go to university. As well as becoming conscious of unresolved aspects to my own identity, and perhaps because of this, I became increasingly aware of the fact that complex sets of meanings attached to the term ‘Irish’ in Britain, meanings that could condition how I was interpreted when I spoke and which could create walk-on roles within particular situations and conversations. Sometimes, these meanings related to the legacies of ‘The Troubles’ in Britain, which in Glasgow, a city with its own sectarian tensions, meant something quite specific. As I would gradually learn, however, such meanings were difficult to disentangle from a much longer history of Irish migration to Britain, a history that, despite having studied Irish history at A-level, I knew nothing about.

If I had stayed in Ireland and gone to University there when I was eighteen, would I have embarked on doctoral research into the experiences of the Irish in Britain five years later? Almost certainly the answer to this question is no. This thesis grew out of the points of cultural contact established when I arrived in Glasgow from Cookstown to take up a place at university in 2002. More precisely, it grew out of feelings of unsetlement connected with issues of cultural positioning and belonging, and so can be seen as part of a broader quest to make sense of and orientate myself within a new environment where ways of framing ‘Irishness’ preceded me. Back in 2002 this process of orientation would lead me in a variety of directions, into a range of conversations with differently situated others. The most important conversation here, however, was the one entered into with the past.

From ‘segregation’ to ‘assimilation’

Once I began to look, it was not too hard to find the Irish in British history. As part of a course on British social history during my first term I was required to read the first chapter of Robert Roberts’ *The Classic Slum*, which described the stratifications of the working-class neighbourhood where Roberts grew up in turn-of-the century Salford. As Roberts recalled, forming ‘the base of the social pyramid’ were ‘bookies’ runners, idlers, part-time beggars and petty thieves, together with those known to have been in prison’. Below even that, however, were Irish Catholic immigrants, who inhabited a milieu all of their own within the community:
Still another family would be scorned loudly in a drunken tiff for marrying off its daughter to some ‘low Mick from the Bog’. With us, of course, as with many cities in the North, until the coming of the coloured people Irish Roman Catholic immigrants, mostly illiterate, formed the lowest socio-economic stratum. A slum Protestant marrying into the milieu suffered a severe loss of face. Such unions seldom occurred.²

Although I was aware of the historical practice of Irish people travelling to Britain in search of work, Robert’s depiction of the Irish as a kind of sub-class within his working-class neighbourhood alerted me to the existence of Irish migration as a distinctive theme within British social history, prompting me to seek out the traces of this process through the footnotes and indexes of articles and books on course reading lists.

What I found both then and five years later tended to confirm Robert’s portrayal of the lowly status of the Irish within the industrial city in important respects. In the face of plentiful contemporary representations, historians of different ideological stripe tended to acquiesce in the view that Irish Catholic migrants formed a kind of ‘outcast’ population within British society, a point which held for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but had particular salience for the nineteenth, when, in the context of rapid British industrialisation and deteriorating economic conditions in southern Ireland, the volume of Irish migration increased considerably. During this period large numbers of Irish, typically poor and lacking in the skills appropriate to the industrial labour market, poured into British urban centres, where they tended to gravitate towards the worst employment and residential districts of the city. Occurring within the context of overlapping debates about the ‘condition of England’, Catholic emancipation, the purity of the British ‘race’, and ‘The Irish Question’, this process of settlement generated a range of religious, racial, class and political tensions, such that the Irish migrant became a key repository for multiple social anxieties within Victorian society.³

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In addition, however, my research also tended to confirm Roberts other suggestion about the ultimate assimilability of the Irish, a process Roberts identified with ‘the coming of the coloured people’ in the post-1945 period.\(^4\) In fact, for many historians of the Irish in Britain this process of assimilation is seen to have been underway well before the arrival of migrants from the ‘new’ commonwealth. According to this narrative, while the Irish had been subject to hostility and segregation in the mid-nineteenth century, by the end of that century ‘successive generations’ had ‘simply merged into the anonymous background of English and Scottish urban life’.\(^5\) While the Irish retained a distinctive religion, declining numbers, the arrival of migrants from Eastern Europe, increased upward mobility, and the growing incorporation of the Irish into the patterns of British politics all pointed to the increased integration of the Irish into the native working class.\(^6\)

In turn, ‘assimilationists’ view Irish experiences in the twentieth century to have reinforced this tendency. If the Irish have continued to come to Britain in large numbers in the twentieth century, the historiography on the Irish in Britain peters out at the end of the nineteenth, a fact explained by some historians in terms of the increasing ease with which the Irish have been able to melt into British society. In the decades after 1945 in particular, when the numbers of Irish migrants to Britain rose to levels comparable with the mid-nineteenth century, few, it seemed, would encounter the sorts of problems experienced by settlers in that earlier period. Indeed, according to Richard Weight, ‘the arrival of large numbers of black and Asian immigrants was instrumental in changing the way that the British saw the Irish’, a fact which helps explain why, despite Eire’s withdrawal from the debate for the Nineteenth century see Roger Swift, ‘The Historiography of the Irish in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, in P. O’Sullivan Volume Two: The Irish in the New Communities (Leicester University Press, London), pp. 52-81.


commonwealth in 1949, Irish migrants retained dual citizenship rights in Britain at a time when other, less numerous migrants were made subject to new immigration controls.\(^7\) When this is added to Irish migrants’ relatively high rates of occupational and social mobility, relatively high rates of intermarriage and exogamy, and relatively low rates of discrimination, ‘Irish assimilation into British society’ appears ‘among the fastest that occurs among immigrant groups anywhere in the world’:

Assimilation is practically complete in a single generation. The children of Irish immigrants, sometimes to the distress of their parents, grow up seeing themselves as English or Scots; they may acknowledge their Irish ancestry and exhibit a few inherited traits, but for all practical purposes they are indistinguishable from their British peers whether in respect of dress or in social, cultural or religious behaviour.\(^8\)

If ‘identity’ is conceived in substantialist terms, such that ‘experience’ becomes an aggregated quantity possessed by the group, claims about the assimilation of the Irish in post-war Britain assume a degree of plausibility, particularly if the experiences of Irish migrants are compared with those of migrants from beyond the ‘British Isles’, and particularly when the experiences of subsequent generations are factored into the calculus. Such an approach, however, may be seen to simplify migrant experience in a number of ways. It is not just that the aggregation of data at group level tends to obscure important variations at the level of the family or individual, or even that assimilationists arbitrarily separate intermeshed aspects of social experience into discrete variables, but that the teleological premises of such analysis admits of only two basic, counterposed possibilities for identification. As regards how such possibilities are realised in practice, that quantitative sociologists such as Michael Hornsby-Smith read statistical data for structural integration as evidence for subjectivity suggests that identity is understood as causally related to broad

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social structures within which pre-given social meanings are inscribed. Increasing or decreasing rates of mobility or intermarriage constitutes evidence for or against (greater or lesser) assimilation because dualistic migrant identifications are inscribed within ‘objective’ social circumstances; how subjects themselves apprehend and objectify such circumstances is not considered. This has led exponents of assimilation to misunderstand and underplay the significance of important continuities in the experiences of Irish migrants in the twentieth century, including sustained tendencies towards occupational and class clustering amongst sections of the migrant population, the formation of communal structures and associations, and the reproduction of derogatory Irish stereotypes within British popular culture.

‘A people unheeded’: the ‘invisibility’ of ‘Irish identity’ and the ‘ethnic turn’

The historical evidence indicates that we have been collectively subject to colonial oppression and subjection legitimated on racial grounds. That we face disadvantage and institutional and personal discrimination, that we have been subject to horrifying forms of cultural docking and psycho-political oppression, I feel cannot be doubted. And yet we remain unrecognized. We are as the translated title of this paper states ‘a people unheeded’...we and the discrimination we suffer are rendered conceptually invisible. So much so, that we are rendered almost powerless in our attempts to explain our problems even to ourselves in order to do something about them.

In light of its various problems, and in keeping with British intellectual trends in the 1990s, the assimilation paradigm has come under heavy attack, most powerfully in the work of Mary J. Hickman. According to Hickman, whose formulations have had a major influence on recent academic production within the historiography, the Irish in Britain have not ‘assimilated’ per se; rather, their experiences have been rendered ‘invisible’ due to the masking effects of a state-sponsored ‘myth of white homogeneity that implicitly includes a myth of assimilation’. This thesis rests on a number of premises. In opposition to revisionist accounts of the ‘outcast’ status of the Irish in the nineteenth century, Hickman

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9 For a useful historicization of the concept of ‘assimilation’ see Green, N. ‘Time and the Study of Assimilation’, Rethinking History 10, 2 (2006), pp. 239-258
stresses the role of the Irish Catholic as a constitutive other in the formation of British national identity during this period. The Irish Catholic was not only a colonial and religious other in Victorian society, but embodied a serious political threat to national elites: ‘a particular fear was that political unity might be forged between the Irish peasantry and the English working class.’ In response, the British state sought to ‘incorporate’ the Irish as part of its project of producing British national identity. At the conceptual level, this involved constructing the different peoples of the ‘British Isles’ as ‘one race’. At the institutional level, ‘state assisted Catholic elementary schools came to be viewed as the principal long term means of resolving the ‘problem’ posed by the Irish Catholic working class’. At the state’s behest, the Catholic Church would thus secure the ‘incorporation’ of the Irish through an education-based programme of ‘denationalisation’, ‘strengthening their Catholic identity at the expense of weakening their national identity’.

Post-war discourses on race and immigration reinforced the masking effects of these strategies. In this period, in the context of debates concerning who legitimately belonged to the nation, social scientists and the state cooperated in the construction of a ‘race relations industry.’ Underpinned by the assumption that contemporary problems of ‘immigration’ and racism were of recent origin, ‘race relations’ institutionalised skin colour as the key criterion in relation to which questions of belonging and discrimination were analysed. In so doing, the paradigm reinforced the idea that British culture had been ‘racially’ homogenous, because uniformly white, prior to post-war immigration from the New Commonwealth and Pakistan. Consequently, the position of the Irish as an internal other of British national culture in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was rendered ‘invisible’ in contemporary discussions of discrimination and minority status. In a context where a steady flow of mobile Irish labour was indispensible for British economic reconstruction, this omission enabled politicians to publically justify Irish migrants’ exclusion from immigration controls in terms of a shared ‘British’ racial heritage that distinguished them from coloured migrants.

14Hickman, Religion, Class and Identity, pp. 2-7.
For Hickman, two important implications follow from these points. In so far as we can talk about Irish ‘assimilation’ in Britain, this should not be seen as a voluntary or unmediated process, but as the effect of active, power-laden processes by which dominant institutions have sought to manage the threat posed by Irish migrants through projects of ‘incorporation’ and ‘denationalisation’. Scholarly exponents of the assimilation thesis are implicated in this process because the choice of ‘assimilation’ as a concept appropriate to explaining Irish experiences is premised on unexamined assumptions about the shared whiteness of peoples from the ‘British Isles’. Irish ‘assimilation’ is assumed to be inevitable, and perhaps desirable, because they are assumed to be white.

Secondly, while the state’s project of producing the peoples of the ‘British Isles’ as ‘one race’ may have rendered the distinctiveness of Irish experiences ‘invisible’, it does not automatically follow that the Irish ‘assimilate’ in the way described by scholars such as Akenson or Hornsby-Smith. The state’s attempts to neutralise the threat posed by ‘the Irish’ did not, according to Hickman, necessarily lead to a loss of identity. Religiously segregated education, the principal means by which de-nationalisation was to be achieved, reinforced the segregation of the Catholic Irish within the British working-class, such that ‘the assiduous training of the young in the primacy of Catholic identity ensured that in this period the differentiation of Irish Catholics and their descendents, from their neighbours and often from their workmates, was regenerated across many decades’. On the other hand, many Irish Catholics would also maintain ‘spheres which were protected from the interference of the Church…in which a variety of forms of belonging were possible’. Thus, ‘the quiescence of Irish Catholics lay in the acceptance of a public mask of Catholicism as its communal identity’, a fact which does not disturb ‘the twentieth century legacy’ of a coherent Irish ‘community’ existing beneath the veneer of ‘invisibility’:

The Irish had formed a community. One which is characterised by heterogeneity; its differentiation from the indigenous working class: having been historically segregated in its

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own social space; and by an ethnicity formed by the articulation of religion, class and national identity in a context of anti-Irish and anti-Catholic discourses and practices.\(^\text{21}\)

Having redefined ‘assimilation’ as ‘invisibility’, the intellectual goal thus becomes ‘visibility’. Working off the assumption that ‘the Irish’ constitute a hidden ‘ethnic minority’ in Britain, from the 1990s a number of scholars across a range of disciplines have undertaken investigations into the experiences of Irish migrants that implicitly or explicitly sought to ‘make visible’ the object of their analysis. As well as demonstrating the continued salience of Irish ethnic identifications in twentieth century Britain, such as in Sharon Lambert’s work, this has involved uncovering experiences of marginalisation and discrimination.\(^\text{22}\) At the heart of the ‘invisibility’ paradigm, and stemming from the idea that ‘invisibility’ is an effect of the British state’s efforts to manage the social and political threat Irish people are perceived to pose in Britain, is the claim that the Irish, like immigrant groups from Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia, suffer forms of exclusion and racial oppression in Britain. More than any others, such themes have informed academic production in the last two decades, prompting and taking centre stage in enquiries into Irish experiences in relation to work, physical and mental health, and the effects of ‘The Troubles’ in Britain.


‘Un-focusing’ optical metaphors: deconstructing ‘invisibility’

In the 1990s, such studies helped re-open debate on questions of Irish identity in Britain, stimulating much needed discussion on the experiences of the Irish in the twentieth century. In the pivotal work of Hickman, this was achieved through unmasking the unexamined but inherently political assumptions underlying monoculturalist claims about the inevitability of ‘assimilation’, in the process re-introducing the fraught history of Anglo-Irish relations and British colonialism in Ireland as structuring variables of the experiences of Irish migrants in Britain. In this respect, the ‘invisibility’ paradigm supplies a position from which to approach the complex and contested character of Irish-British boarder-crossings, a feature of Irish migrant experience absent in narratives about integration/assimilation. More broadly, Hickman’s work asks us to look again at social relations of power and the role of the institution in shaping migrant experience, whether this is the state, school or church.

This thesis seeks to retain these concerns with identity and power. It seeks, however, to shift the focus onto the dialogic production of migrant subjectivities at the level of individual biography, signalling a move away from defensive notions of collective ethnicity. While scholars like Mary Hickman have been correct to question the assimilationist orthodoxy, problems nevertheless attach to how the concept of ‘identity’ is handled within the discourse on ‘invisibility’. In a powerful analysis of repressive models of power, Michel Foucault has observed that such theories effect a kind of double conditioning:

The affirmation of a sexuality that has never been more rigorously subjugated than during the age of the hypocritical, bustling, and responsible bourgeoisie is coupled with the grandiloquence of a discourse purporting to reveal the truth about sex, modify its economy within reality, subvert the law that governs it, and change its future. The statement of oppression and the form of the sermon refer back to one another; they are mutually reinforcing.

To proclaim the repression of sex is to construct its liberation as an inevitable and desirable end. In the process, the very truth of sex is established. To assert the ‘invisibility’ of ‘Irish

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23 To ‘un-focus’ a concept is to reverse the retreat to transparency by which its meaning has become literal. See preface of Hans Kellner, Language and Historical Representation: getting the story crooked (University of Wisconsin, Wisconsin, 1989).
identity’ is to construct its ‘visibility’ as an inevitable and desirable end. In the process, the truth of ‘Irish identity’ is established: to refer to the in/visibility of something is to pre-constitute that which is in/visible as always-already there. Not only this, but the coupling of repression/liberation through which this pre-constitution is achieved is also an opposition. Although it is the British state and ‘British national identity’ more generally which are positioned as responsible for Irish ‘invisibility’, it is through narrating the story of the Irish in Britain as a struggle for identity, in which ‘the Irish’ and ‘British’ are figured as protagonist/antagonist, that opposing Irish/British collectivities are established. Overlapping oppositions between Irish/British, Catholic/Protestant and immigrant/native labour are mapped onto the minority/majority opposition in order to secure the boundaries and internal coherence of an Irish ethnic identity at the level of theoretical discussion.

The point, of course, is that the relationship between the category ‘Irish identity’ and subjects’ experiences of migration needs to be empirically investigated before one can begin to make claims about the existence and nature of migrant identifications. Yet exponents of ‘invisibility’ appear little concerned with how migrant identities are constructed and re-worked over time, in and through the processes of migration and settlement. Hickman offers no account of the processes underpinning the construction of the category ‘the Irish’, nor of the complexities involved in migrant embodiment of this or any other category. She appears to assume that the statement of certain basic facts, strung together and animated under the aegis of an all-purpose concept of ‘the Other’, supplies sufficient grounds for positing the existence of a collective ‘consciousness’: ‘for the Irish working class in Britain, religious affiliation and national identity, articulated with class position, were the basis of the oppositional consciousness they possessed’; while immigrant and native labour shared a similar relation to the means of production, in the last instance the ‘oppositional consciousness’ ‘possessed’ by Irish migrants was determined by contextual dynamics of religious and national-political conflict, even if such dynamics ‘articualted’ with ‘class position’.25 However, even if the premise that broad narratives of Britishness uniformly disavowed the figure of the Irish Catholic other is accepted, it does not automatically follow that Irish migrants ‘possessed’ an ‘oppositional consciousness’, as if the form migrant identifications took was already inscribed within the process of othering itself. As Brubaker and Cooper argue, ‘categorical group denominations – however authoritative, however

pervasively institutionalised – cannot serve as indicators of real groups or robust identities.”

Indeed, if the processes of self and other positioning within discourse are ongoing and perpetually transformative, always becoming, never being, at what juncture may we ever posit the birth of ‘identity’? What justification, either ontological or analytical, is there for positing the existence of an entity, formed via metaphors of ‘articulation’, ‘crystallisation’ or ‘congealment’, called ‘identity’, a noun whose meaning is semantically inseparable from notions of stasis/unity/permanence?

As these latter points imply, the suggestion is not merely that claims about the existence of ‘Irish identity’ need to be empirically investigated, but that the teleological assumption which sees ‘visibility’ as the necessary outcome of a struggle over identity here operates in tandem with linked assumptions about the ontological status of ‘identity’ and the transparency of language. Figuring ‘Irish identity’ through optical metaphors objectifies or reifies ‘identity’ as a transparent object of observation, ultimately inscribed within social context: because the meaning of the circumstances in which migrants find themselves is understood as transparent, that is, as inherent in those circumstances, migrants ‘have’ the same ‘experience’ and so the same ‘identity’. As part of this process of reification discrete, interactive and on-going processes (psychic investments, discursive representations, social practices) are conflated, then sealed into a finished, self-contained product (identity) which subjects are presumed to ‘have’ or ‘possess’. Writing of the ‘twentieth century legacy’ of nineteenth century Irish settlement in Britain, Hickman states that:

The incorporation of the nineteenth century Irish immigrants was never completely successful because although the State and its agencies managed to regulate the expression of Irish identity it was not able to eradicate it from all those of Irish descent.

If ‘assimilation’ is to be re-defined as ‘invisibility’, the non-expression of ‘Irish identity’ must be re-defined as its masking behind a Catholic ‘communal identity’. These redefinitions, under the reifying connotations of ‘identity’, treat ‘Irish identity’ as an object or thing, a possession which some have furtively protected from ‘eradication’ but that others

27 Hickman, Religion, Class and Identity, p. 248.
may have ‘lost’. This treatment of ‘identity’, by abstracting it from the on-going processes of construction, enables ‘Irish identity’ to appear as relatively fixed over time, linking nineteenth century migrants with post-war migrants as well as successive generations under the one rubric, in order to substantiate the idea of a long-standing ‘Irish community’. In addition, however, the same process of reification blurs and runs together a whole gamut of psychic and cultural dynamics whose multiple interactions in shaping identifications and social meanings are temporally and contextually specific. As such, the complex intersections between memory, emotion, belonging, self-understanding, discourse, space, and time are left unspecified, undocumented, and unanalysed: the dialogic, uneven and problematic nature of self-construction is occluded by an impression of coherence and fixity.

To some extent, the confusions surrounding ‘identity’ within the ‘invisibility’ paradigm may be represented as those of the historiography as a whole. Although historians and sociologists have been debating the issue of Irish ‘assimilation’ for some years, most have been reluctant to examine the metaphysics underpinning the terms of that debate. So although scholars such as Hickman operate with the express goal of moving beyond the dichotomies associated with ‘assimilation’, because ‘identity’ itself remains untheorised many of the closures of that paradigm continue to haunt the narrative of ‘invisibility’. This is apparent in the way that ‘identity’ continues to be read as an effect of context, even if the meanings viewed as intrinsic to this context are different. It is apparent too in the way that the nation-state, ‘the silent discourse in much of the work of segregation/assimilation historians’, returns within the ‘invisibility’ paradigm as the other against which pluralised ethnic identities are defined.

These hauntings, however, also need to be understood within the context of the 1980s, when a discourse on Irish ‘invisibility’ emerged as part of a process of ethnic mobilisation amongst sections of the Irish population in Britain. As scholars of British immigration have argued, as well generating violent racial tensions and a defensive re-drawing of the

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28 The main exceptions to this are to be found in the field of literary studies. See, for example Liam Harte, ‘Loss, Return and Restitution:’ Autobiography and Irish Diasporic Subjectivity’, in L. Harte (ed.), Modern Irish Autobiography (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007), pp. 91-110. See also Breda Gray, pp. 111-131, in the same volume.
boundaries of Britishness, by the 1960s post-war immigration from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean had become implicated in the institutionalisation of an imported discourse on ‘multiculturalism’. Apparent within the discourses of journalists, politicians and, in a different form, social scientists, the arrival of such immigrants initially stimulated a popular re-vitalisation of pre-existing racial categories within British culture as a means of framing host and immigrant, insider and outsider. This produced the black immigrant as the racial other against which post-imperial narratives of Britishness were consolidated, shaping the legislative process by which the terms of British citizenship were narrowed between 1962 and 1981, but it also played into a process of ‘ethnic mobilisation’ amongst ‘minority’ groups that echoed, and at points intersected with, the emergence of new nationalisms in the postcolonial world.29 ‘Race Relations’ legislation, in both Britain and the US, was shaped within a context where highly visible forms of racism were inciting the formation of networks of immigrant protest and pressure groups which drew on established self-other distinctions to place the issue of minority discrimination on the political agenda. The Race Relations Act 1976 in particular was formulated within a context of militancy on the part of black and Asian migrants in Britain, when demands for recognition and racial equality were being asserted in place of the ‘melting-pot’ rhetoric of conciliation and assimilation.30 Beyond outlawing racial discrimination in British public life, the Race Relations Act created provision for the ‘promotion’ of ‘good race relations’, establishing structures for the monitoring, investigation and redress of discrimination, and the recognition of minority status. In so doing, the act helped formalise the community relations culture in which multicultural identity politics developed in Britain. As well as forms of state racism, British de-imperialisation thus encompassed the legitimation and institutionalisation of a vision of Britain as a ‘multicultural’ society, a ‘community of communities’ comprising ethnically or racially distinct minority and majority groups, whose ideal relation was one of toleration and mutual respect rather than assimilation.31

30 Goulbourne, Race Relations, p. 61-74.
31 Goulbourne, Race Relations, chap. 5 for a discussion of the aims, content and presuppositions of race relations legislation.
The important point here is that the Irish, despite being one of the largest migrant groups in post-war Britain, initially did not participate in these developments in the same way as migrant groups from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Although Irish migrants did encounter distinct forms of hostility in post-war Britain, the Catholic associational and informal leisure cultures in which sections of this population participated did not become sites for the expression of militant demands for racial equality, but engendered images of belonging that evoked tropes of white domesticity and ‘affluence’ alongside those of national difference. The 1980s, however, would witness an important change in this situation. Although the emergence of the ‘New Right’ in this period signalled a replenishment of public discourses on the boundaries of white Britishness, outbreaks of urban unrest nevertheless generated intense public discussion on the position of ‘ethnic minorities’ within British society and their participation within British politics. Within the Labour Party internal discussions on the responsibilities of the party to its black and Asian voters would lead ultimately to the election of four black candidates to parliament in 1987, and to greater efforts by various local Labour councils, particularly in London, to promote anti-racist initiatives and encourage active participation of minority representatives in local and national government. It was in this context that a network of Irish activist groups, academics and social welfare organisations based in London began to campaign for the inclusion of Irish migrants within the framework of multicultural politics in Britain. Initially, this focused on the local level and the Greater London Council, an institution whose leader, Ken Livingston, had publically expressed his support for the inclusion of the Irish within a more comprehensive multicultural agenda. Thus, the first official statement recognising ‘the Irish’ as a ‘community’ subject to ‘racism’ appears in Policy Report on the Irish Community, a report of research conducted by the GLC’s Strategic Policy Unit published in 1984:

London’s Irish…community [is]…poorly housed, and suffering from a disproportionately high incidence of mental illness in relation to its size. It is a community baited by the media,

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32 According to Enda Delaney, ‘contrary to popular perception, the Irish were by far the largest ethnic minority in Britain in 1971’, totalling 709, 235 people according to the census of that year.’ See Enda Delaney, Demography, State and Society (Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2000), p. 264.
suffering constant attacks on its cultural and social identity and deterred from political mobilisation by the threat of imprisonment and exile under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The root of these problems lies in racism against the Irish, a factor yet to be acknowledged as a major problem in British society.\(^{36}\)

Having secured recognition at the local level in 1984, activists now turned their attention to building a case for ethnic recognition at the national level, combining demands for identity recognition and socio-economic redistribution, and coming to centre on the inclusion of ‘Irish’ as an ethnic category on British census forms. The Commission for Racial Equality, however, which was statutorily obliged to include an Irish dimension in all its work if it could be shown that Irish people were systematically subjected to racial discrimination in a similar way to non-whites, was not as easily persuaded as the GLC on the status of the Irish as an ‘ethnic minority’. Between 1984 and 1993 Irish activists made a succession of bids for inclusion of the Irish within the CRE’s multicultural framework, but on each occasion were unsuccessful.\(^{37}\) Even after CRE funded research into the experiences of the Irish community, carried out in 1991 by a group of Irish welfare activists and academics under the leadership of sociologist Robert Miles, the commission concluded that ‘the paucity of evidence on discrimination against the Irish was still a bar to accepting’.\(^{38}\)

According to Kevin Howard, this situation changed after 1993, not because the requisite evidence on discrimination was finally uncovered, but because personnel changes within the CRE worked out in favour of the Irish claim, and more importantly, because the incoming Labour government in 1997 sought to enhance promotion of the multicultural agenda as a policy goal.\(^{39}\) The important point here, however, is that the campaign mounted by activists incited the production of a discourse on Irish experiences in Britain whose dominant tropes were in large measure governed by CRE criteria for ethnic recognition and the conceptual framework of multiculturalism more generally. The dialectics of application and refusal


\(^{38}\) Quoted from a letter of correspondence from the CRE to the Irish Research Advisory Committee on 24 September 1991 following the completion of the latter’s research proposal *The Irish Community: discrimination and disadvantage*. Taken from Howard, ‘Constructing the Irish in Britain’, p. 113.

fuelled a research quest for the uncovering of anti-Irish racism, in both the past and present, leading to the amplification of a language of repression and victimisation within the reports of welfare organisations and official committees, the literature of activist groups such as the Irish in Britain Representation Group and the London Irish Women’s Centre, and even in the *Irish Post*, whose owner Brian MacLau clearly saw advantages in the formal institution of an ‘Irish community’.

So long as recognition was refused, however, a story of ‘invisibility’ was also necessary in order to explain why anti-Irish discrimination did not manifest itself as in the case of other ethnic minorities, and, implicitly, to explain why no post-war history of Irish mobilisation was apparent, when Irish migration was at its peak. The notion of Irish ‘invisibility’ was thus not only produced in relation to that of ‘assimilation’, but drew its meaning from the construct of the ‘ethnic minority’, specifically black ethnic minorities. ‘The Irish’ were thus not ‘invisible’ per se, but *relative* to other minorities, and activists and researchers sought to convince sceptical authorities that black and Irish migrants shared common histories and experiences, despite having different coloured skin. In November 1992 Angie Birtill, a housing and welfare rights officer at London Irish Women’s Centre, wrote to Jim Smellie, senior manager of Homeless in London, to complain about the organisation’s failure to distinguish the Irish as a separate group in a recent report on homelessness in the City. Birtill felt that:

> The fact that the ‘Health and Homeless in Hackney’ report fails to acknowledge the ethnic minority status of the Irish is deeply insulting. Your omission not only ignores the scale of disadvantage and discrimination facing Irish people in this country. It also represents a very narrow application of the race relations legislation to the concerns of the Irish community. The disadvantage and discrimination facing Irish people is rooted in the historical and continuing colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland in a way that effectively mirrors the colonial relationship between Britain and non-white communities...We do not accept your justification for putting all the European ‘white’ groups together.⁴⁰

As Birtill’s reference to the ‘continuing colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland’ here indicates, ‘The Troubles’ c.1968-1998 in Northern Ireland, conceived as a ‘colonial

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war’, represented a key means by which activists attempted to construct the Irish and other minorities as the same. As Paul Gilroy has noted, the intensification of political mobilisation amongst black activists in the 1980s took place amidst vocal public debates about the national belonging of the British-born offspring of post-war immigrants then ‘coming of age’ within Thatcherite Britain.\(^{41}\) Irish ethnic mobilisation in the 1980s was also, at least in part, driven by the sons and daughters of Irish migrants who came to Britain in the 1950s and 60s, and can be understood as an effort to secure recognition for a felt sense of difference outwardly ‘invisible’ within British culture. But in the Irish case mobilisation was also triggered and shaped by the effects of ‘The Troubles’ in Britain, which incited a resurgence of popular anti-Irish feelings, particularly in response to the Republican bombing campaign in England from the 1970s. As well as being subject to popular hostilities at the local level, the representational practices of journalists and the surveillance tactics of the state helped produce ‘the Irish community’ as the object of a suspicious gaze, and it was in this context, in which public discourse had reconstituted ‘the Irish’ as a ‘community’ and coded it as ‘suspect’ because of a presumed link with ‘terrorists’ in Northern Ireland, that many second-generation activists became politically conscious of their Irishness.\(^{42}\) Angie Birtill herself, whose mother had migrated to England from Meath in the post-war years, recalled that:

The civil rights movement and Bloody Sunday focused my Irishness and I think it did for a lot of other people as well. Suddenly there were images being flashed up on the television of Irish Catholics like ourselves being batoned by the RUC and B-Specials and later being shot by British paratroopers. I remember big arguments breaking out in my classroom at school amongst daughters of service people who attempted to justify what the troops had done and those of us who were absolutely mad about it. I remember falling out with some of my friends over Bloody Sunday and being aware of other girls who were second-generation Irish, suddenly forming a connection with them, and not realising or ever having been conscious that they had been Irish until that point and suddenly I saw their anger that I felt too. For a lot of second-generation Irish people, not just from Liverpool but throughout this


country, Bloody Sunday forced those who had not been conscious of their identity or who had brushed it to one side to take stock of who they were.\(^{43}\)

A similar conversion motif, centring on the effects of ‘The Troubles’, was also hinted at in the recollections of Mary Hickman, whose parents migrated to England before the second world war:

Now my Irishness is to the forefront as director of an Irish Studies centre. I’d say my sense of Irishness went through a process of dormancy in my late teens when I was at university, but, inevitably, like a lot of people, Northern Ireland made one have to think about it.\(^{44}\)

‘The Troubles’ helped trigger a process of ethnic mobilisation amongst sections of ‘the Irish community’, not only because that ‘community’ was now subject to more overt forms of discrimination, but because such discrimination was itself an effect of conflict in the ‘homeland’, a conflict through which the difference between ‘British’ and ‘Irish’ could be clarified. ‘The Troubles’ thus provided the stimulus for a diasporic politics through which some members of the second-generation, their sense of difference hitherto hidden or ‘dormant’, could embody and project a sense of Irishness.

Crucially, however, this diasporic politics could only function as a means of becoming ‘visible’ to the extent it sharpened the distinction between ‘Irish’ and ‘British’, that is, to the extent the conflict in Northern Ireland could be seen as a ‘war’ between the British state and ‘Irish Catholics like ourselves’ in which second-generation activists could recognise their own struggles. As well as predisposing activist groups involved in ethnic mobilisation towards a traditional Republican interpretation of Irish history, this kind of investment motivated attempts to discover parallels and correspondences between the situation in Northern Ireland and the experiences of the Irish in Britain, ultimately to read the history of the Irish in Britain as a subplot within the grander Republican totality of struggle between

\(^{43}\) Interview with Angie Birtell, carried out by Anne Holohan and taken from her book Working Lives. The Irish in Britain (The Irish Post, Middlesex, 1995), pp. 60-61.

\(^{44}\) Interview with Mary Hickman, carried out by Anne Holohan and taken from her book, Working Lives, p. 131.
‘these islands’. According to a policy statement issued by the Irish in Britain Representation Group in 1986:

The IBRG was born as a result of the wish of Irish people living in Britain for an effective voice to comment on all aspects of their lives in this country. In realising this wish the IBRG first of all recognise that the lives of Irish people living in Britain are underscored and structured by Britain’s relationship to Ireland and further recognise that this relationship has historically been one of intervention on the part of Britain. It is this intervention which has resulted in the situation in Ireland and the disadvantaged position of the Irish community in Britain. The IBRG recognises that the statelet of ‘Northern Ireland’ was deliberately created by the 1920 Government of Ireland Act and maintained against the wishes of the majority of Irish people. The IBRG also recognises that the war in ‘Northern Ireland’ is a direct result of British colonial policy and we therefore maintain that any just and lasting solution must include a recognition of the island of Ireland as a single, independent, sovereign political unit. The IBRG recognises that this continuing war has led to attacks on the civil liberties and political rights of Irish people living in Britain.45

The discourse on Irish experience generated around ethnic mobilisation in the 1980s thus syncretised the schemas of British multiculturalism and Irish Republicanism. Multiculturalism supplied the concept of an ‘ethnic minority’ entitled to recognition on the grounds of cultural difference and discrimination, and Republicanism supplied an adversarial interpretation of Anglo-Irish history that helped legitimate the insertion of Irish migrants within that framework, that could naturalise the basis of difference and discrimination, and that could even explain its ‘invisibility’ in terms of the incorporating strategies of the coloniser. To the extent that ‘the struggle’ between ‘Irish Catholics’ and ‘the British state’ is made the overriding explanatory principle and ‘liberation’/’visibility’ the necessary endpoint of action, events in Ireland and Britain become parts of a totality and the history of the Irish in Britain from the nineteenth to the late twentieth century a continuum. In the process specificity and difference, discontinuity and rupture, are occluded. The meaning of migrants’ actions, the interactions they have with the various spaces and institutions they come into contact with and the identifications, self-understandings and emotions engendered through these interactions, are predetermined at the level of analysis: they are either expressive of ‘Irish identity’, where this is defined in

opposition to ‘incorporation’ and the meanings of ‘British national identity’, or they reflect
the success of ‘incorporation’, ‘Irish identity’ having been ‘eradicated’ in this instance.

In the work of academics who subscribe to the ‘invisibility’ paradigm this has resulted in the
effective denial of the specificity and diversity of the experiences of post-war migrants,
whose lives assume the form of an ‘invisible minority’ from the vantage point of the late
twentieth century. Mary Hickman has argued that by approaching race through the prism of
colour, the ‘race relations’ paradigm in British research and policy helped reproduce a ‘myth
of white homogeneity’ that rendered the Irish ‘invisible’ as a minority and reinforced
assumptions about Irish ‘assimilation’.46 ‘Race relations’ did unjustifiably reinforce such
assumptions, but its objects of analysis reflected its embeddedness within post-war British
de-imperialisation, a process which produced the black immigrant as a constitutive other of
the contracted British nation, and which engendered systematic forms of racism that
stimulated black ‘ethnic’ mobilisation. While Irish stereotypes were still an integral part of
British culture in this period, they did not play into this process of de-imperialisation in the
same way. The Irish were not a constitutive other of racialised discourses on Britishness,
Irish migrants did not mobilise in support of racial equality, and ‘race relations’ did not train
its scientific gaze on them as an object to be analysed, a problem to be solved.

Acknowledging that Irish people encountered discrimination, or that Irish subjectivities
were distinct from other forms of subjectivity constituted within British culture, does not
warrant re-instating them within the ‘race relations’ paradigm retrospectively as an
‘invisible minority’. This is to ascribe multiculturalism the status of a transparent
description of social reality, while implying that history should have happened differently.
More importantly, it implies that migrants’ ‘identities’ were in some sense negated or
unrealised due the regulatory or incorporating programme of this or that institution. But this
is to confuse ‘identity’, or the variable processes that go under that name, with ‘interest’.
Hence Hickman writes about ‘the contest for Irish identity’ between the church, the British
labour movement and Irish nationalist groups, equating ‘identity’ with allegiance.47

46 Hickman, Religion, Class and Identity, pp. 2-7.
47 Hickman, Religion, Class and Identity, pp. 226-234.
The point is that migrant subjectivities were constituted through such institutional programmes simultaneously, involving diverse interactions that enabled a variety of self-positionings that straddled and contradicted the conceptual boundary between ‘Irish identity’ and ‘British national identity’. Indeed, the process of migration to post-war England involved migrants in ongoing dialogues with a diverse array of discourses, related to a range of spaces and contexts, situated at the local and private as well as the communal, public and national levels, and in the place left behind as well as the place of settlement. The form such dialogues took was never pre-determined or one-way, but depended upon how, within the specific context of the lived realities of individuals’ lives, subjects negotiated and invested emotionally in the discourses that shaped their experiences. This was conditioned by the constraints and possibilities of the discourses themselves, but also on migrants’ past experience and how its accretion engendered variable psychic needs and desires, predisposing subjects to converse with their environments in particular ways, at particular moments in their lives.

It is these migrant dialogues, neglected within the historiographical discourses on ‘assimilation’ and ‘invisibility’, which this thesis seeks to investigate. Such an investigation presupposes access to the lives of Irish migrants who settled in England during the post-war period, and to a methodology suited to exploring the dialogic constitution of subjectivities. To that end, we turn now to a discussion of oral history, the chief methodology deployed in this thesis.

**Oral history, migration and the dialogics of subjectivity**

In the second half of the twentieth century oral history has become a key methodology for scholars researching social groups whose experiences have been neglected within traditional archival sources. Along with scholars of the experiences of women, the working classes and colonised peoples, historians of migration have been to the fore in this trend. As the oral historian Alistair Thomson has observed, ‘a central and abiding claim of oral historians of migration has been that the migrant’s own story is likely to be unrecorded or ill-

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documented, and that oral evidence provides an essential record of the hidden history of migration’. In the case of Irish migrants in twentieth century Britain, oral history has thus provided an important means of contesting Irish ‘invisibility’ and authenticating claims about identity. The process of ethnic mobilisation described above stimulated and utilised the products of a rash of oral history projects conducted by community activists and academics in the 1980s and 90s, and funded by charities, local government, and in one important instance, the CRE.

Frequently based on group reminiscence, many of these community-based projects produced histories whose function was both commemorative and therapeutic, a tendency which has become increasingly pronounced following the election of ‘New’ Labour in 1997 and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Others have tended to produce histories in the mode of what Ann Laura Stoler, writing about the study of colonialisms, has termed ‘subaltern memory’. Memory in this mode is:

…the medium, not the message, the access point to untold stories of the colonised. In efforts to restore a more complete memory of the colonial and struggles against it, oral histories are often invoked to counter official versions and the sovereign status they implicitly give to European epistemologies. Subaltern acts of remembering have not been in question, because it is the official memory that is on the line; the process of remembering and the fashioning of personal memories are often beside the political points being made – and may in fact be seen to work against them.

Virtually all book-length oral histories of the Irish in Britain published in the last 35 years have used oral narrative to give access to untold stories about the experiences of the Irish in

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twentieth century Britain. Against an official myth of white homogeneity and historiographical assumptions about ‘assimilation’, these stories often recover experiences of disadvantage and discrimination as well as evidence of the persistence of an authentic Irish identity. Within this mode of memory oral narrative thus functions as the medium via which an Irish voice muted through incorporation becomes audible, and which makes visible an Irish ethnic community within Britain’s multicultural landscape.

As Thomson notes, the distinctive contribution of oral history in this mode concerns the agency it makes possible for individuals and groups previously written out of history. Through ‘recovery’ history ‘working-class men and women, indigenous peoples or members of cultural minorities…have inscribed their experiences on the historical record and offered their own interpretations of history’. Yet as Stoler suggests, such histories also tend to neglect ‘the process of remembering and the fashioning of personal memories’. In the case of the Irish in Britain, the oral history projects mentioned fail to acknowledge their status as sites of memory, productive of narratives of experience whose form is shaped by the context of the 1980s and 90s and the goals and mnemonic technologies of the activist-researchers involved. This unreflexivness has in part been underwritten by a particular reading of the relation between the subject and social context: if oral narrative here functions as a medium through which a muted Irish voice becomes audible, this medium is conceived as transparent. The ‘recovery’ of ‘invisible’ experience implicitly assigns personal narrative the status of an unmediated reflection of an objective realm, or the direct expression of a primordial ‘identity’ held apart from the ‘distortions’ of discourse.

This model of social experience has been one of the main casualties of the epistemological rethinking initiated as part of debates about the status of historical knowledge in the 1980s and 90s. Post-structuralist problematisation of empiricist methodology has yielded the claim that the ‘evidence of experience’ is never direct in a simple unmediated way. As Joan Scott has argued, it is not individuals who have access to an objective external reality through some looking-glass of ‘experience’; rather, it is individuals who are constituted through

‘experience’, where ‘experience’ is a ‘linguistic event’. Margaret Somers frames this ‘event’ in terms of narrative: ‘it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities’. In short, narrative is constitutive of our experience of reality; it thus cannot be separated from it.

These points concerning discursive mediation render oral history in the ‘recovery’ mode inherently ‘unreliable’ within the frame of a correspondence theory of knowledge. If form and content are effectively inseparable, the idea of oral narrative as a repository of ‘facts’ about the world and the self becomes untenable. On the other hand, they also point to new possibilities for the study of migrant subjectivity. If respondents’ narratives are a means by which they give meaning to and make sense of their own experiences through investment in the various cultural discourses available to them, so study of such narratives can yield insight into how subjectivity is shaped through culture. By focusing on how narrative subjects draw on ‘the generalised subject available in discourse to construct the particular personal subject’, oral narrative becomes evidence for the inter-subjective constitution of subjectivities. Approached thus, personal narratives of migration potentially supply access to the stated object of this study: migrants’ constitutive dialogues with the different discursive environments they inhabit as part of the migration process.

In order to exploit fully the possibilities opened by this notion of inter-subjectivity, historians interested in the historical constitution of subjectivities have sought to operationalise it with a view to unpacking the re-workings and interactions of personal and public memory. A key concept here is that of ‘composure’:

Composure is an aptly ambiguous term to describe the process of memory making. In one sense we compose or construct memories using the public languages and meanings of our

culture. In another sense we compose memories that help us to feel relatively comfortable with our lives and identities, that give us a feeling of composure.\footnote{A. Thomson, \textit{Anzac Memories. Living with the Legend} (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994), p. 8.}

If ‘experience’ does not occur outside of language, neither then does ‘memory’. Remembrance is not a passive process of retrieval, whereby copies of prior experience are brought before the mind, but an interpretative act through which we reconstruct our pasts in terms of the varied discursive forms available within culture. Crucially, this process of interpretative reconstruction is informed by the emotional needs and desires of the subject engaged in the act of telling. The act of composing a story about one’s life is shaped by a desire to form a unified and integrated whole from the different and potentially conflicting parts of the self. Integration here refers to a temporal dimension: the act of narrating a history of the self’s experiences over time involves an attempt to synthesize past and present, to make the experiences of the past acceptable to the self situated in the present, in order to promote a sense of security and well-being. Simultaneously, however, this integration of past and present also occurs in relation to a need for social recognition focused on various real and imagined audiences. Composing past and present is never a private act, but is conditioned by subjects’ need to belong and feel understood within a range of publics, local and particular, national and general. Composure thus presupposes dialogue with these publics, each of which, in interaction with the specific events of a person’s life, contributes to defining the possibilities for social recognition and subjective composure.\footnote{My understanding of the notion of ‘composure’ is indebted to Summerfield, \textit{Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives}, pp. 16-23, Thomson, \textit{Anzac Memories}, pp. 7-13, and G. Dawson, \textit{Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities} (Routledge, London, 1994), pp. 22-26.}

The definition of these possibilities is also closely related to the effects of a second, intersecting process, namely the ‘cultural circuit’. According to this formulation, the relationship between the consumers and producers of culture forms is not one-way, but is better approached in terms of circuits of discursive production. Within such circuits, stories and images constructed by groups and individuals at one location, situated at the local and private, may be appropriated for particular purposes by groups or institutions situated at the national and public levels. Here, the ‘original’ stories are reworked and generalised for distribution to a wider, typically mass, audience, at which point they become available once
more for personal consumption in a different form. What memory theorists have emphasised about this process is its political and power-laden character, not only in the sense that a politics necessarily underpins the question of whose stories gain access to a public audience and in what form, but in the sense that widely distributed generalised forms powerfully shape the possibilities for private memory production. The circuit gives groups and institutions with particular interests and agendas a powerful role in forming national memory and public norms, a process which inevitably affects how individuals reconstruct and understand their own pasts. Indeed, the subject-positions the circuit makes available for self-understanding and expression may not be universally accessible: personal experience often differs from public constructions that are designed to define how experience should be.\(^59\) In such instances, if personal experiences cannot be made to fit with dominant meanings and an alternative mode of expression cannot be found, the voice of personal experience becomes ‘muted’\(^60\). The interpretative task does not consist only in discovering the polyphony of voices that resonate with and through the speaking voice, nor in identifying the points of renegotiation where constraining subject-positions are transgressed, but also involves listening for the murmurs of the submerged voice that has been drowned out.

These last points have a particular salience for the Irish in post-1945 Britain. The central claim of the ‘invisibility’ paradigm is that there has been a public silence in Britain concerning the experiences of the Irish and that Irish migrants, in particular those who arrived during the post war years, have adopted a ‘low public profile’ about their identity due to overwhelming pressures to incorporate themselves within the terms of white Britishness. In effect, it has been argued that Irish identity has been drowned out by the dominant British national identity, hence its ‘invisibility’. If this is the case, the process and effects of muting should be discernable within public discourse and within personal narratives of settlement. These gaps and silences thus form an important point of investigation in what follows.

\(^59\) This explanation of the ‘cultural circuit’ derives from Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, pp. 24-26.

In theorising remembering as an act of interpretative reconstruction, underpinned by a need for subjective coherence, the concepts of ‘composure’ and the ‘cultural circuit’ address squarely earlier criticisms of oral history centring on the ‘unreliability’ of memory. By suggesting that we read oral narrative as a kind of metaphor for an interior process of integration, where this process of metaphorisation is conditioned by sets of overlapping dialogues playing out against broader cycles of cultural production, composure transforms the subject’s tendency to re-write past experience into a resource. ‘Inaccuracies’, tendencies towards forgetting and occlusion, exaggeration and fictionalisation, become evidence of the reworking of subjectivities overtime through dynamic interaction with a social environment in which the forms of public memory are themselves being recycled and reworked in particular ways.

In addition, by stressing the importance of the subject’s need for internal coherence as a structuring dynamic of narrative production, composure draws our attention to a crucial psychic dimension in the constitution of subjectivities, alongside the stress on discourse. As Michael Roper suggests:

What emerges from this kind of approach is a sense of subjectivity, not as wholly composed by ideological formations – competing, contradictory or otherwise- but as a matter of personality formed through lived experience and the emotional responses to those experiences. A biographical perspective allows us to see the assimilation of cultural codes as a matter of negotiation involving an active subject...[and]...as a selective and partial process, never complete, and always partly dependent on earlier experience.61

To claim that experience is a ‘linguistic event’ is not to claim that discourse determines experience. Discourse supplies the terms within which thought and action are formulated, but formulation is always an active negotiation, where multiple interpretative possibilities exist. These interpretative possibilities are not a simple function of the play of meaning, but relate to how subjects, apprehending the world through the ‘screen’ of their own emotions, invest differently in the forms available to them. The interior psychic landscape here denoted by the term ‘screen’ does not refer to drives and desires pre-constituted within the

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subject, but to what exponents of Kleinian theory term ‘psychic imagos’. These internal imaginative constructs or phantasy objects mediate between the psychic and the social in the sense that they are neither purely the product of internal drives nor entirely symbolic forms derived from the external world, but are built up over time through the interplay between both. In omnipotent phantasy imagos are constituted, broken-apart and split-off through alternating processes of introjection (by which the self incorporates aspects of the external social world into its internal objects) and projection (by which it expels or projects internal feelings or impulses into the social world).  

Crucially, however, as well as being formed through social interactions psychic imagos also condition them: cycles of introjection and projection encompass both the formation of interior psychic structures through such processes, and are the means by which these structures in turn initiate and shape further rounds of introjection/projection, that is, further constitutive interactions with the social world. In terms of the positioning effects of discourse, to say that the ‘assimilation of cultural codes’ is ‘a matter of negotiation involving an active subject’ is to say that how subjects invest in their discursive environments (the forms they select and how they interpret and make use of them) is conditioned by desires, impulses and beliefs formed through previous interactions between the psychic and the social, and that such investments in turn affect the imagos that conditioned them. The subject-in-formation is thus ‘always partial, never complete’ in that it is constantly being added to and split, re-ordered and subdivided in a ceaseless bid to form a coherent whole through interaction with its environment.

Experience then is not only a ‘linguistic event’, but a psychic one too, and any attempt to analyse the dialogic constitution of subjectivity needs to examine the inter-subjectivity of oral narratives as encompassing processes of discursive mediation in dynamic intersection with those of psychic interiority. As regards the process of composure, this underlines the point that narrative acts of reconstruction are never only present-centred. The reciprocal interactions of the internal and external worlds of the subject form parts of a process of accretion and sedimentation by which experience forms the subject and by which the subject

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comes to understand and know itself in particular ways, as having characteristic, though by no means coherent, desires and anxieties, beliefs and values. Sedimented during earlier phases of development, these imagos continue to act upon the self in the present such that any attempt to achieve composure in the here-and-now must address them and the past experiences to which they relate. It is in this sense that the subjectivities constituted through oral narrative are underpinned by a dialogue between past and present.

One final kind of dialogue affecting the production of memory within the interview concerns the interview relation itself. As Summerfield states:

The process of the production of memory stories is always dialogic or inter-subjective in the sense that it is the product of a relationship between a narrator and a recipient subject, an audience.  

As noted above, this ‘audience’ may be constituted in the abstract, as a particular public shaping the interview from outside, but ‘audience’ also refers to the dynamics obtaining within the interview itself. The narrative produced is always shaped by a relation between how the interviewer attempts to structure the interview, and how the interviewee interprets the interview situation, including the overarching goals of the interaction and the identities of the interviewer. In terms of the current study, a number of aspects of my own autobiography are important here. My own migration to Glasgow in 2002 not only sparked my initial interest in the Irish in Britain, but stimulated too a theoretical interest in issues relating to ‘identity’, an interest subsequently developed through my chosen undergraduate programmes of study in philosophy and social history. In terms of the current project, this was to translate into a preference for frameworks and methodologies orientated towards the study of interiorities. Interviews were ‘semi-structured’ in that they were based on a schedule of questions informed by the research goals of the project and my reading of the historiography, yet were approached in such a way as to encourage respondents to talk about what most interested them, even if this did not appear at the time to correspond to pre-defined themes. Interview strategy was based on trying to elicit memories rich in emotion rather than external ‘fact’, using both negative and positive techniques. As well as trying to

appear non-threatening and deferential, so as to put subjects’ at their ease, I tried to ask questions that encouraged story-telling by focusing on contextual details and personal feelings rather than the abstract issues that lay behind the questions. In this way, I sought to prompt respondents to talk about what was most meaningful to them about their lives as migrants.

Finally, how subjects’ constructed themselves within the interview was also conditioned by how they perceived and identified me. In this respect, the production of memory was affected by the various visual and aural markers of social identity I carried into the interview situation. At the time the interviews were carried out I was a student researcher, aged between 25 and 27, based at Manchester University. In addition, I was male, white and, significantly, spoke with a Northern Irish accent. Thus, while some respondents identified me with the institution of the university, others focused on my accent, prompting questions and discussion about Northern Ireland and Ireland more generally. As we shall see, in some instances the influence of this dynamic was particularly marked, inciting and shaping memory production in relation to themes connected with Northern Irish politics.

To re-cap: it has been argued that, through framing Irish migrants’ experiences within totalising narratives about ‘assimilation’ and ‘invisibility’, pre-existing historiographical accounts of post-war migrants have tended to simplify their experiences, denying their specificity and underplaying their diversity. To the extent that they have worked within the terms of these narratives and neglected issues concerning the construction of memory, oral histories of the Irish in Britain have tended to reproduce the assumptions of these paradigms, in particular those of the ‘invisibility’ narrative. This thesis seeks to investigate the specificity of Irish migrants’ experiences in post-1945 England by using oral history to explore the dialogic constitution of migrant subjectivities.

In the first instance, ‘dialogic’ here refers to the inter-relation between discourse and subjectivity. The thesis explores how subjects reconstruct their experiences of migration in and through the forms made available within a range of discourses, drawn from a range of spaces and contexts. As well as national and institutional forms, these contexts include the place left behind, spaces of work and leisure in post-war England, and the particular public
of the Irish community in Britain. Throughout this exploration, and with particular reference to the production of what may be termed the ‘communal imaginary’ of the Irish in Britain, a key focus is on how various circuits between individuals and different publics have affected the reshaping of public and communal understandings of migrant experience over time, and on how these reworked versions become implicated in the production of private memories of settlement in England.

As this implies, the second key dynamic to be examined is the dialogue between past and present. Rather than seeking to ‘recover’ the voice of the past, the thesis explores how migrants’ efforts to reconstruct their experiences are shaped by individually distinct strategies of composure by which they attempt to make past and present, public and private, and as we shall see, there and here, cohere. This permits exploration of migrant subjectivity as something which shifts overtime, rather than as a static ‘identity’, but it also directs us towards the multilocated and subdivided nature of migrant subjectivity. The third major theme running through the thesis concerns the psychic dimension of the dialogues constitutive of migrant subjectivities. The boundedness attendant upon the reification of ‘identity’ not only fences ‘identities’ off from one another, but fences internally coherent ‘identities’ off from one another, such that the ambivalence and indeterminacy that reside at the heart of ‘identity’ are erased from the story of migrant experience. This thesis reads the dialogue between discourse and the subject as one between discourse and ongoing interior psychic processes. It does so in order to develop analyses of migrants’ interactions with their environments, both past and present, which reveal the decentred nature of migrant experience and identifications and the implications this has for totalising narratives about the Irish in Britain.

**Horizons of possibility, sites of memory**

A recurrent criticism of the use of personal narrative in historical research concerns its particularity. Critics have repeatedly argued that while oral narratives may tell us much about individual lives, the knowledge gleaned from such sources is so specific that it cannot shed light on the more general processes historians say they are interested in. Indeed, such is the particularity of each individual narrative that its relevance may be restricted to the realm
of the single life to which it refers. Oral sources, in short, are ‘unrepresentative’. And the smaller the sample, the more precarious the inference of general conclusions.

Of necessity, for such a critique to be effective the object of analysis in relation to which concerns about representivity are expressed must be quantifiable. The notion of representivity here invoked is statistical and presupposes an ontology where objects are discrete, countable and amenable to averaging. As the foregoing discussion about oral narrative and subjectivity has argued, however, the objects of interest in this study are not easily reducible to such terms and concepts. Subjectivity and social meaning are not fixed, self-contained things that can be aggregated into pre-constructed categories and assigned an average value. Experience is *sui generis* because of the way it is the product of individually specific negotiations with a set of variable dynamics, while its meaning appears different from different standpoints. Part of the goal of the research is to demonstrate how migrant experience resists simple classification into the rigid, mutually exclusive categories historiography has bequeathed.

Yet personal narrative does have a ‘representivity’: it lies in the fact of its being the product of particular time and place, and that it could not be the product of another time or place. John MaGahern’s *The Dark* cannot be said to be representative of the ‘average’ experience of a boy growing up in rural Ireland in the 1940s, but the novel as an imaginative form could not have been produced in eighteenth century Paris. In this sense, the form of the novel embodies or is expressive of certain imaginative possibilities of the cultural space of which it is a product – it constitutes, in Alessandro Portelli’s useful phrase, part of the ‘horizon of possibilities’ of subjectivity formation within a given historically located culture – the way in which the structuring dynamics of a culture enable certain sorts of thought and emotion but not others, and encourages particular sorts impulse and desire but proscribes or prohibits others.64 Every narrative of experience is therefore *sui generis* due to the highly

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64 A. Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 1997), pp. 86-89. As Portelli explains, ‘oral history… offers less a grid of standard experiences than a horizon of shared possibilities, real or imagined. The fact that these possibilities are hardly ever organised in tight, coherent patterns indicates that each person entertains, in each moment, multiple possible destinies, perceives different possibilities, and makes different choices from others in the same situation. These myriad individual differences, however, only serve to remind us that, beyond the necessary abstraction of the social science grid, the actual world is more like a mosaic or patchwork of countless different shapes, touching, and overlapping, and sharing, but also cherishing their irreducible individuality. As
specific character of the subject’s interaction with a set of structuring dynamics, but its representivity also derives from its relation to that particular set of dynamics since these define the imaginative possibilities of the culture in which the subjectivities narrativised take shape.

This ‘horizons of possibility’ approach informs the scope and aims of this project. Based on 8 interviews with Irish migrants carried out between 2009 and 2011, the sample, research methods and analytic frameworks used were chosen with the aim of undertaking an in-depth biographical study of a small number of migrant lives that would illuminate the diversity of migrant experiences simultaneously with the cultural horizons that conditioned their production. The aim was not to discover the statistically average kind of Irish migrant experience, since this misunderstands the very nature of ‘experience’ as here defined; each experience has its own specificity. Yet each individual narrative, however unique, is always representative in that it materialises a subjectivity whose forms have been constituted through the process of migration to post-war England. Each new narrative adds complexity to our understanding of the shifting limits and potentialities of that cultural horizon.

In terms of sample design, while respondents were selected without reference to social class, age, occupation, marital status or position within official Irish bodies, they had to have migrated from southern Ireland to England during the ‘post-war period’, defined here as 1945-69. While these restrictions obviously excluded various categories of ‘Irish’ migrant, must notably migrants from Northern Ireland, given the maximum four-year time-frame for the project and the preference for in-depth contextualisation of subjects’ lives, it was necessary to set limits on geographical origin and date of migration. The south was ultimately chosen as the place of origin since the bulk of Irish-British migration during the post-war decades was from here (although figures for the north are uncertain) and 1969 the outer limit of the periodisation because the 1970s witnessed a significant drop in emigration from Ireland.

sciences of the individual, oral history and literature deal with the portions of the mosaic that cannot be subsumed under the grid. They give us unwieldy representations, often harder to handle and work with, but perhaps more consistent not only with the presence of subjectivity but also with the objective reality of things.’
One further factor that affected sample formation and so potential 'horizons' was the location in which the project was carried out. In the early stages a number of respondents were located with the aid of Manchester Community Care, a charity-funded welfare organisation with strong links to the Manchester Irish Centre, and thereafter through snowballing methods based on information supplied by respondents or family members, as well as through independent contacts based at Manchester University. However, the common denominator in each case was that respondents all lived in the Greater Manchester area at the time of the interviews between 2009 and 2011. Undoubtedly, this point of commonality has significance for any attempt to describe the horizon of possibilities conditioning migrants’ experiences of settlement. However, labelling the project a study of ‘Irish migration to Manchester’ or ‘The Irish in Manchester’ throws up two related issues. Firstly, unlike a number of recent city-focused studies, this project is not a study of a local migrant community defined by a set of community-based organisations. While research involved interaction with such bodies and their practices have produced sources used to contextualise individual migrant’s life histories, the goal was not to tell the story of ‘the Irish community’ in post-war Manchester, not least because certain respondents did not see themselves as part of this community.

Secondly, describing the study as ‘Irish migration to Manchester’ implies that respondents migrated directly to Manchester, or at the very least, that they spent the main part of their migrant lives in Manchester. In fact, only two respondents migrated directly to Manchester, the rest having settled first in other parts of England, in particular London. The significance of this is that respondents frequently assigned these earlier phases of settlement an equal if not a greater importance in their narratives, such that the larger share of various chapters take as their geographical setting places other than Manchester. In other words, where a story of a community is usually (but not always) about something relatively fixed in geographical space, migration narratives are, in Thomson’s phrase, ‘moving stories’, where subjectivities are constituted through the process of movement. While a geographically anchored communal public may constitute an important site of memory within a respondent’s narrative, there are usually other, geographically dispersed sites of equal importance to subjectivity formation. The nature of migrant experience resists simple categorisation under the heading of one fixed place since migrants are in conversation with many different spaces and sites.
A similar point emerges in relation to the issue of periodisation. The interviews, five of which took place in respondents own homes, three in a reserved room in the Manchester Irish centre, were one-to-one and based on a ‘semi-structured’ interview schedule. This schedule, formulated during the early parts of the project, reflected my early understanding of the migration journey as linear and chronological: questions prompted respondents to talk about growing up in Ireland, leaving, arriving, work, family, and so on up to the present. Early drafts of the overall structure of the thesis reflected similar assumptions about linearity in that there was a clear attempt to organise chapters chronologically. Eventually, however, this sequential ordering of chapters was abandoned as it proved impossible to fit narratives into the chronology without obscuring the key point of interest, namely the dialogicity of narratives. Because respondents constantly moved back and forth between past and present, here and there, chapters had to be re-organised on a thematic basis, as sites of memory around which personally significant stories were woven. What became apparent through the reflections that motivated these restructurings was that the term ‘post-war’ and the periodisation 1945-69 are inconsistent with the horizons of migrant subjectivity because this concerns the whole span of a person’s life, not just the historical period. Memory cannot be confined by the parameters of academic categories nor ordered according to linear scales.

Chapter two takes as its focus the British construction industry, a major employer of Irish labour in the post-1945 period, and indeed throughout the twentieth century. To date, academic representations of work within the industry, particularly those influenced by Marxian formulations, have tended to stress its exploitative nature. In academic and some popular representations of Irish experiences within the industry, the building site routinely appears as a site of alienation and bodily mutilation. This chapter attempts to develop a more complex understanding of the meanings Irish men attach to their experiences of work within the industry. Setting the analysis within the broader context of the post-war British economy and culture, the chapter uses the personal work histories of three male migrants to explore the industry as a site for the constitution of gendered migrant subjectivities. As well as investigating how subject’s performance of distinct roles, different occupational trajectories, and changing conditions within the industry shaped their experiences in different ways, the chapter foregrounds how Irish migrants’ experiences within the sector have generated a diverse range of competing public and communal representations of the
identity of the Irish construction worker. The chapter analyses the distinct ways such
gendered images of migrant selfhood are implicated in the dialogue by which subjects
endeavour to make their experiences within the industry, and the identifications engendered
through them, cohere with the psychological needs of the self situated in the present.

Chapter three explores Irish migrant women’s’ memories of pre-marriage experiences in
post-war England, with a particular emphasis on women’s experiences of work and leisure
in the post-war city. Within the historiography, Irish women’s experiences in Britain have
tended to be represented in opposing ways. On the one side, scholars have stressed the
importance of family and ‘tradition’ in the reproduction of Irish Catholic femininities in
Britain. On the other, women’s migration to Britain has been figured as an epic escape from
patriarchy, signalling a desire for greater independence and personal status. Focusing on
three female migrant’s memories of the years between leaving for England and getting
married, this chapter seeks to complicate the neat compression of feminine migrant
experience into linear stories about the rejection or reproduction of patriarchy. Paying close
attention to how processes of emotion and discursive mediation intersect, it explores how
subjects’ negotiated a number of ‘modern’, familial, religious and metropolitan discourses
on feminine selfhood during an interstitial moment between leaving one family and forming
an other, between leaving behind one place and settling in another. This exploration
suggests that, for these three respondents, composing memories of this period in their lives
was a problematic process, shot through with anxiety and loss as well as excitement and
satisfaction, and rarely arriving smoothly at a pre-destined point of self-realisation.

Chapter four switches the focus to ‘The Troubles’, or more specifically the 1996 Manchester
bomb, as a site of memory production. As noted above, one of the effects of republican
bombing campaigns in Britain during the 1970s, 80s and 90s was to render Irish people
resident in Britain subject to a widespread discourse on ‘suspicion’. For a range of scholars
and activists this process has been viewed in terms of negation, as effecting a repression of
Irish identity in Britain that works to reinforce the ‘invisibility’ of the anti-Irish racism. By
contrast, this chapter suggests that the period of ‘The Troubles’ was scene to a proliferation
of discourse on the experiences of the Irish in Britain, inciting a number of competing
narratives of Irish migrant selfhood that addressed the events and tensions of ‘The Troubles’
in competing ways. Focusing on memories of the Manchester bomb as a case study, this
chapter explores how three migrants reconstruct the aftermath of this event through drawing a range of competing public and communal narratives generated around the bomb. Through analyses of the different versions of experience and conflicts of belonging articulated through these memories, the chapter explores how the ‘The Troubles’ could be productive, rather than merely repressive, of forms of Irish migrant selfhood in post-1945 Britain.

Chapters two, three and four all investigate sites of self-construction related to migrants’ experiences in Britain, that is, to their experiences in the country of settlement. A major deficiency of pre-existing work on Irish migrant experiences in modern Britain, however, is that it tends to ignore how migrants’ experiences in the place left behind shape their self-understandings of the migration process. Given the complex function the practice of emigration performs in Irish society, and the conflicting meanings the practice takes on in different forms of cultural discourse, consideration of the ways in which emigrant subjectivities were constituted through Irish discourses on exit is crucial to any attempt to understand the production of migrant subjectivities in Britain. Chapter one uses migrants’ memories of leaving Ireland between 1945 and 1969 as means of exploring the constitution of emigrant subjectivities. Based on a reading of five oral narratives which sets them within the economic, political and cultural contexts in which mass emigration from mid-twentieth century Ireland took place, it examines how subjects interact with a set of competing constructions of the Irish emigrant as they attempt to explain the particular circumstances and considerations that conditioned their experiences of leaving for England. As we shall presently see, this attempt to investigate emigrant subjectivities as the product of an interplay between objective circumstances, competing discursive forms and interior psychic processes not only complicates generalised assumptions about the ‘causes’ of emigration, but complicates too assumptions about the place left behind as a shared point of origin, forming the basis of a shared identity within the context of settlement. It is to this concern with leaving as a site of difference and disparity that we now turn.
Chapter One
Disparity at the Origin: Leaving and the Construction of Emigrant Selves

The body of the emigrant

The Famine did not create, but it helped to transform and intensify, the anti-English hostility that underpinned much of Irish nationalism in mid to late nineteenth century Ireland. ‘The Famine’, suggests Alvin Jackson, ‘brought much more sweeping casualties and a much more vivid, because painful and immediate, sense of the injustice of British government’. Emigration, which scaled unprecedented heights during The Famine, was intimately tied up with this transformation. Along with starvation, disease and cultural decimation, in the post-Famine imaginary of Irish nationalism emigration was codified as a potent symbol of British oppression. As such, most nationalist stories of Irish liberation and self-realisation included a story about the termination of emigration. One of the twentieth century legacies of this has been the engendering within nationalist thought of an expectation that independence would coincide with an end to emigration. In effect, the termination or continuation of emigration as a feature of Irish culture would become one of the criteria by which progress towards national self-realisation was assessed.

The achievement of Independence in 1922 did not mark the end of emigration in Irish society. During the very same period in which emigration was being formulated as national tragedy within the discourse of nationalism, it was also being cemented as a routine social practice within the rural society national elites would later seek to preserve as the embodiment of an authentic Irish identity. Uneven and differentiated though it was, the

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67 See appendix 1, table (i) for average annual rate of emigration from Southern Ireland 1901-66.
institutionalisation of what scholars have termed the ‘stem family’ in the decades following The Famine established the inheritance of the family holding by one son and late, dowried marriages as the strategies by which small tenant farmers, now the largest class of farmers within the countryside, secured continuity on the land. Emigration, while already existing within rural culture in a number of forms, was a function of these practices, resolving the contradiction between high fertility rates and imparticable inheritance, while contributing to the family economy via the sending of remittances. Because it brought only minimal changes to the structure of the Irish economy, political independence did little to alter these practices, particularly in areas, such as the ‘congested’ west, where the economy of the small farmer proved especially resilient. Particularly for the young undowried daughters and non-inheriting sons of the smallest farmers, emigration remained a vital familial strategy in the decades after 1922, mitigating the effects of overcrowding, in the process forestalling the generation of social tensions that might have undermined the workings of the system as a whole.

This contradiction, between the vaunted nationalist ideals of independence and the ingrained practices of rural culture, would prove a difficult one to negotiate for successive Irish governments after 1922, and in particular for leaders, such as Eamon de Valera, whose credibility rested on appearing faithful to the ‘august destiny’ proclaimed in 1916. On the one hand, because governments consistently failed to generate enough additional regular employment through successive industrialisation policies, a rural labour surplus was a


69 However, it is necessary to stress the highly uneven effects of The Famine. Most importantly, one should not overstate the cohesiveness of the ‘class’ of farmers who survived The Famine. Considerable differences existed between the larger ‘grazier’, whose increasing power and wealth often ensured the entry of offspring into the professions, and the smaller mixed farmer, whose subsistence on the land was much less secure and whose dependence on emigration was therefore much heavier. One further needs to separate out the experiences of the western counties, where greater poverty meant that emigration before and during The Famine was less pronounced than elsewhere. As a result, the older system of small, subdivided holdings survived. This would alter in the post-Famine period due to the rationalising activities of the Congested Districts board, and as a result of emigration, which increased as relative costs decreased and remittances accumulated. This, however, would happen only slowly, while the process of consolidation would result in the formation of numerous, relatively small tenant holdings, kept afloat on agriculturally poor land due to the proceeds of emigration. The long term effect was the prolongation of emigration from the west into the twentieth century as the entrenched practice of a highly precarious and deeply conservative familial system.
constant problem within the economy.\textsuperscript{70} Within this context, the continuation of emigration was essential to the reproduction of rural society in that it represented a solution to the problem of labour surplus. Despite public condemnation of emigration as the pre-eminent ‘national evil’ by leaders such as de Valera, government policy thus made few attempts to limit the practice.\textsuperscript{71} Indeed, although no official bilateral agreement was ever formalised between the British and Irish governments, as the economy stagnated and unemployment rose during the Second World War the Irish government would effectively sanction centralised British recruitment of around 120,000 Irish workers into British war industries, despite Ireland’s official neutrality.\textsuperscript{72}

On the other, accelerating rates of emigration punctured nationalist myths about self-sufficiency, inciting obsessive mediation on the betrayal of 1916 and anxieties about national failure. Governments’ constrained by the terms of nationalist doxa were vulnerable to attack by critics such as Peadar O’Donnell, a socialist republican writer and political commentator who contributed regularly to publications such as An Poblachta and The Bell during the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Writing at the end of the war, just before a major spike in emigration to Britain, O’Donnell presented population ‘loss’ as an effect of poverty, linking policy failure with the ‘shadow of the famine’:

\begin{quote}
The shadow of the famine is still across the national mind. The cure all for unemployment is still the Relief Scheme, a stepped-up version of the workhouse gruel of other days. Anxiety is gestured to with words, those terrible please – God – and – thank – God – and – nothing – in – between speeches which promise the poor most of the things a beggar might seek but deny men and women the one thing above all they need, jobs in which they can take pride. In these circumstances we risk the loss of the greatest proportion of population since the famine.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{72} Clair Willis, \textit{That Neutral Island. A History of Ireland During the Second World War} (Faber and Faber, London, 2008), pp. 313-316.

Emigration was thus a complex and highly contentious issue in post-independent and post-war Ireland. Emigration, a long-established practice, was a major solution to the problem of chronic unemployment, a problem that potentially threatened the stability of the infant state, and was ultimately integral to Irish modernisation. Yet emigration made visible the contradictions of independence and the fractures of Irish political culture, in the process stimulating the recycling of images of past trauma within national and public discourse.

But what was the relationship between these public discourses on emigration and the self-understandings of post-1945 migrants? How did migrants negotiate the conflicts of emigration? The stark portrayal of socio-economic conditions in mid-century Ireland in the writings of critics such as O’Donnell offers one kind of answer. For O’Donnell, emigrants were impoverished ‘exiles’, embittered by the government’s betrayal of the ideals of independence:

The exiles are not in any mood to make excuses for it. They must be the bitterest lot ever forced from these shores by conditions. They do not blame partition, Cosgrave, de Valera, IRA, Norton, Larkin. They blame everything and curse everybody. The Ireland they freed has failed them and it hurts.74

This figure of the embittered ‘exile’ is a recurrent motif in a range of sources, both contemporary and present-day. In his memoir, for example, John McGahern recalls the bitterness of some of the young Irish migrants he encountered while working as a labourer in England during his summer holidays in the early 1950s.75 The German writer Heinrich Boll encountered similar attitudes when he undertook a tour of Ireland during the same period. Aboard a steamer from Liverpool to Dublin in the mid-1950s, Boll found himself listening to a fraught exchange between a young Irish woman and a priest as he settled down to sleep on the ship’s deck just after midnight:

“No, Father, no, no…it hurts too much to think of Ireland. Once a year I have to go there to visit my parents and my grandmother is still alive. Do you know County Galway?”
“No,” murmured the priest.
“Connemara?”

75 J. McGahern, Memoir (Faber and Faber, London, 2005), pp. 210-211.
“No.”
“You should go there, and don’t forget on your way back in the port of Dublin to notice what’s exported from Ireland: children and priests, nuns and biscuits, whiskey and horses, beer and dogs....”
“My child,” said the priest gently, “you should not mention these things in the same breath.”
A match flared under the green-gray blanket, a sharp profile was visible for a second or two.
“I don’t believe in God,” said the light clear voice, “no, I don’t believe in God – so why shouldn’t I mention priests and whiskey, nuns and biscuits, in the same breath? I don’t believe in Kathleen ni Houlihan either, that fairy-tale Ireland....I was a waitress in London for two years: I’ve seen how many loose women....”
“My child,” said the priest in a low voice.
“...how many loose women Kathleen ni Houlihan has sent to London, the isle of the saints”.
“My child!”
“That’s what the priest back home used to call me too: my child...but even he couldn’t stop Kathleen ni Houlihan exporting her most precious possession: her children.”

Observed from the deck of a ferry strewn with bodies, suitcases and ‘scraps of whispered conversation’, Boll’s snapshot of this exchange seems to provide a glimpse into the bitterness that characterised one young emigrant’s attitude to her ‘homeland’, at a time when Ireland was ‘exporting’ some 42,000 of its ‘children’ a year to Britain. The young emigrant’s use of such language to frame her understanding of her situation is indicative of a cultural circuit between public constructions of ‘exile’ and personal understanding, revealing the contours of an imaginary of emigration that existed in tense relation with the idealised vision of national culture projected by religious and political elites within official discourse.

This image of the exile, however, was not the only one evoked by the young woman as she responded to the Priest’s pleas for conversational propriety. The exchange so vividly captured by Boll may also be read as a localised instance of moral contestation by which the young emigrant resists the interpelling effects of the priest’s terms of address, rejecting the illusions of the culture that has forced her to leave. Thus, she no longer invests in the idealised father and mother figures of official Irish culture, and the priest’s appeal to moral innocence falls on deaf ears. In so subverting the prescribed asymmetry between father and child, the young emigrant here locates a subject-position beyond the imaginary of the passive exile, one that enables the articulation of ‘a light clear voice’ and an assertive version of self.

Such a subject-position was associated with a contemporary liberal discourse on the emigrant. The post-war period was not only one in which socio-economic disparities were a source of public contention in Ireland; it was also one in which the frugal, morally pure, rural existence sanctified within Catholic-nationalist discourse lost purchase as an image in which new generations of Irish people could recognize their aspirations. This was apparent in the growing rates of consumption of forms of ‘modern’ commercial leisure, and in relation to emigration itself, which performed the double function of an escape route for those desiring new opportunities, and a feed-back loop by which the forms of British consumer culture were re-circulated back into rural parishes, enticing others to the city. For cultural nationalists, members of the clergy and religious societies, the new versions of selfhood articulated through these processes were typically perceived as a threat to established values. Over the period as a whole, however, official discourse on emigration moved towards publically legitimating, within certain limits, the emigrant’s ‘modern’ aspirations. For Sean O’Faolain, perhaps the most articulate exponent of a view of the emigrant as enterprising and self-assured, post-war Ireland was scene to the birth of a new ambitious generation no longer prepared to submit to the oppressions foisted upon their parents by restrictive ‘tradition’:

All our young people are developing a proper concept of what constitutes decent living conditions, and until they get them, they are on strike against marriage. We are rearing generations in Ireland that have ten times more pride and ambition than their parents ever had, and good luck to them for it. As one young woman put it to me in two sentences: ‘I saw what my mother went through. Not for me, thank you!’

In post-war Ireland the body of the emigrant became a site on which developing ideological rivalries between competing elements within Irish culture were played out. The snapshot presented by Boll hints at the contradictory ways these competing constructions could shape

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77 As the majority report of the Commission on Emigration put it: ‘A natural desire for adventure or change, an eagerness to travel, to see the world and share the enjoyment of modern city life, to secure financial independence by having pocket money and by being free to spend it in one’s own way, to obtain freedom from parental control and a privacy not obtainable in one’s home environment, to be free to choose one’s own way of life – such matters affect a proportion of young people everywhere and they appeal strongly in a country where there has been, for so many years, and established tradition of emigration’. Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems 1948-1954, Reports (Dublin [1955]), p. 138.

individual emigrant subjectivities at the time. This chapter explores the diverse and often contradictory ways five migrants take-up and negotiate these same constructions as they attempt to construct personal narratives of leaving in the present. Situating the versions of experience produced within the economic, political and cultural contexts in which mass emigration from mid-twentieth century Ireland took place, the chapter seeks to complicate the notion of a uniform emigrant experience through exploration of the formation of individual emigrant subjectivities as the product of a complex interplay of factors articulating within migrants’ ‘habitus’. This is pursued through three sections focused on different aspects of respondent’s strategies of self-construction. In the first section, the focus of the analysis is two respondent’s distinct interactions with contemporary narratives of ‘exile’ and ‘economic necessity’. In the second section, the focus is on two respondent’s use of quest structures, associated with liberal constructions of the emigrant, to frame their memories of leaving. The third section endeavours an in-depth analysis of a particularly fraught leaving narrative as a means of exploring one instance where the effort to compose memories of leaving runs into special difficulties, resulting in the production of a highly disintegrated emigrant self.

‘Exile’ and ‘economic necessity’: narratives of ‘having to go’

Many commentators on post-war Irish emigration have approached its handling within Irish culture through notions of repression, conceiving of it as something that was shrouded in public silence because of the devastating contradictions it embodied. Fintan O’Toole, for example, has suggested that Ireland’s demographic realities posed ‘a constant threat’ to national elites’ attempts to solidify the ‘form of an innate and immemorial Irishness’.

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79 As noted in the introduction, how subjects interact with their discursive environments is conditioned by the accretion of past experience. Deployed in conjunction with the psychoanalytic concepts ‘introjection’ and ‘projection’, Pierre Bourdieu’s concept ‘habitus’ provides a means of analysing this process of accretion that potentially brings together the symbolic, material and psychic dimensions of subjectivity formation. Designed as an alternative to humanist notions of rational action as well as forms of structuralist determinism, yet formulated with the goal of explaining social reproduction in terms of the internalisation and externalisation of social position, ‘habitus’ refers to how socialisation within a particular environment, in and through the discursive and material practices constitutive of that environment, engenders ‘dispositions’ to understand and act in the world in patterned, though not pre-determined, ways. One of Bourdieu’s definitions of the concept describes ‘habitus’ as ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations’. Quote from Pierre Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990), p. 53. See also P. Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (Routledge, London, 1992 [1979]).
necessitating the erasure of emigration from images of the primordial nation. The official fantasies of national selfhood produced in mid-twentieth century Ireland certainly tried to write emigration out of their nostalgic portrayals of ‘traditional’ culture. The classic example is de Valera’s 1943 St. Patrick’s Day address to the nation, broadcast on national radio three months before the general election of the same year:

That Ireland that we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires that man should live.

Broadcast at a time when the Irish state was sanctioning the use of Irish labour exchanges as recruitment points for British war industry, de Valera’s hoary vision of an ideal rural Ireland mounts an extraordinary project of mystification. The denial it effects, however, is highly precarious: the backward-looking image of national selfhood projected works simultaneously to re-affirm an imaginary in which rural preservation, economic self-sufficiency and the termination of emigration are intimately related ideals.

Because, in other words, the nationalist imaginary continued to exercise a powerful influence over the formation of public discourse during this period, so the trope of ‘exile’ remained a potential discursive option, providing a powerful way of understanding mass population movement for a range of contemporary observers. A poetics of exile was apparent in the despairing rhetoric of cultural nationalists and alarmed priests, for whom emigration, expressly linked with The Famine through tropes of ‘blight’, ‘extinction’ and ‘racial decay’, threatened to obliterate the ‘traditional’ rural culture both groups consecrated as the essence of the Irish Catholic ‘race’. In a different way, the trope of exile became a powerful weapon in the discursive arsenal of those critical of Fianna Fail’s management of

the economy, particularly in the 1940s. If the immediate post-war years witnessed some recovery in the Irish economy, the period was also one in which such critics could point to a growing labour surplus on the land, a rising cost of living, and a steady increase in union membership and industrial unrest as evidence of the party’s failure to realise its vaunted commitments to creating employment and social equity.\(^{83}\)

Presented as the most damning symbol of this failure, rising emigration would figure prominently in these political contests as a way of undermining Fianna Fail’s claimed faithfulness to the revolutionary ideals of 1916. Writing in the journals *An Poblachta* and *The Bell* throughout the 1930s and 40s, the socialist writer and critic Peadar O’Donnell repeatedly emphasised the connection between unresolved poverty in rural Ireland and rising emigration, warning of ‘the danger to the nation’ in an emerging trend whereby temporary migration to England became permanent.\(^{84}\) Ignoring the fact that the bulk of those migrating to England were increasingly under 25 and single, O’Donnell noted seasonal migration to England had long been ‘a method of holding on to a home in Ireland’. In recent years, however, the migrant was increasingly ‘dragging the anchor’ due to the rising cost of living and low wages in Ireland. Thus, for O’Donnell, whose interpretation reflected socialist concerns with emigration’s role in reducing social pressure for change in Ireland, such migrants were ‘exiles’ who, had they access to reasonable employment at home, would soon return, their emigration having been involuntary in the first place. Writing at the end of the war, O’Donnell claimed that:

There are a quarter of a million Irish men and women in Britain so recently exiled as to be still on call if signalled to as the war ends. Let the word go out among them, on authority they will trust, that there are jobs to return to at wages on which homes can be rested and they will be back in droves, cheering.\(^{85}\)

No doubt to the relief of political and religious elites, the ‘quarter of a million…recently exiled’ did not return after the war, despite O’Donnell’s hopes. Rather, between 1946-51 they were joined by around 110,000 additional ‘exiles’ responding to the removal of British

\(^{85}\) O’Donnell, ‘Call the Exiles Home’, p. 382.
entry controls in 1946 and the employment opportunities offered by British reconstruction.\(^{86}\)

In the growing volume of criticism levelled at the government from the mid-1940s, however, O’Donnell’s construction of the emigrant as victim of inept and unjust economic management would become a powerful device in the hands of those seeking to disturb Fianna Fail’s electoral hegemony, particular in the run-up to the 1948 election. In December 1947, the leader of the Labour Party, William Norton, complained of how emigrants were ‘being driven from the country by low wages, irregular employment and feelings of frustration’.\(^{87}\) Sean MacBride, leader of the newly formed Clan na Poblachta, went further still. Alluding to Fianna Fail’s role in facilitating emigration during wartime and immediately after, MacBride suggested that ‘the government’ and ‘foreign agents’ were complicit in the ‘export’ of ‘boy and girl emigrants at one pound a head’.\(^{88}\)

At the political level, these events culminated in Fianna Fail’s first election defeat in 16 years and the establishment of a coalition government, one of whose first actions was to order a commission on emigration. More importantly here, they helped replenish an understanding of emigration as involuntary exile within post-war Irish culture. Such an understanding supplied a narrative framework for the leaving memories of my first respondent, Denis, who left Kerry, a western county characterised by high emigration and the economy of the small farm, for London in 1948. Born in 1927, Denis grew up near Listowel on his family’s small 25 acre farm, the family’s main source of income. The fourth-born in a family of 4 boys and 3 girls, Denis attended Clarmaket local school up to age 14, an experience Denis described as ‘alright’ but unproductive: ‘I didn’t learn a lot there’.\(^{89}\) Of much greater interest to Denis in recalling his memories of this period were the forms of work he was involved with growing up, both on his family’s farm and for the local council after leaving school. Echoing de Valera’s sanctified vision of ‘a people who valued material wealth only as the basis of right living’, Denis in particular ‘loved working everyday’ on ‘the bog’, where, employed by the council from 1941, he drove a horse and cart transporting turf:


\(^{88}\) Sean MacBride, quoted in ‘Youth Emigration Encouraged by Government’, *The Irish Times*, February 2, 1948.

\(^{89}\) Denis Heaney, p. 3.
I enjoyed the work with the freedom and the... the craic and everything like that was great growing up. [Pauses]. That’s what I enjoyed. Very little money, but we had a great time.  

During wartime, fuel shortages and rising unemployment prompted the government to grant local authorities powers to acquire and work bogs as part of a national turf drive, initiating an intensification of production in both hand and machine won turf. As a result of this intensification, Denis was able to secure ‘steady’ employment at Lyrecrumpane, a local blanket bog established in 1937. However, despite the government’s continued protection of the industry in the immediate post-war years, the gradual increase in imported fuels and moves towards greater rationalization and mechanisation would coincide with a significant fall in the numbers employed. As Denis recalled, around ‘47 or 48 things were slowing...going very quiet. In our place anyway, you know’. As such, given the lack of alternative forms of employment in the immediate vicinity and the fact that Denis was not in line to inherit the family farm, in order to keep ‘working and making a living’ Denis ‘had to make a shape’ in September 1948:

Well you had to leave hadn’t you? A crowd of people, growing up, going on for twenty years of age, no work for them. They had to go, hadn’t they?

On first reading, Denis’s account of leaving in 1948 appears to reproduce the main themes of the narrative of ‘economic necessity’ then prevalent within public discourses on emigration. This narrative, through which the emigrant is constructed in passive terms, his actions forced upon him by factors beyond his control, provides a framework within which Denis can construct a coherent understanding of a situation where the opportunities for alternative forms of action were or were perceived to be extremely circumscribed.

Looked at again, however, Denis’s framing of his reasons for leaving in the form of a question, together with the shift to second and third person plural pronominal forms, is suggestive of a defensive tension, as if the narrating self were engaged in justifying to the narrated self and the audience a contested view. A little further on, when I ask Denis to

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90 Denis Heaney, p. 5.
91 C. Ó Gráda, A Rocky Road: The Irish Economy since the 1920s (Manchester, 1997), p. 114.
93 Denis Heaney, p. 8.
disclose his personal feelings about leaving, the reasons for such defensiveness become slightly clearer:

**Barry:** Erm, how did you feel about it? Erm, did you want to go?
**Denis:** Ah, [pauses] I felt… well, I felt I had to go, like. But I was all… I always meant to go back.  

Denis’s punctuated reply here registers a return to the first-person and an important modification of his previous narrative: ‘you had to go’ is replaced with ‘I felt I had to go’. This disclosure, which qualifies the idea of ‘economic necessity’, appears to articulate a form of admission, intimated through the statement’s pauses and the repentant disclaimer: ‘But I was all…I always meant to go back’.

One way of explaining these features of Denis’s narrative here concerns tensions inherent within Denis’s rural habitus, visible as a conflict between his material circumstances and tensions within the code of rural masculinity internalised by him during this period of his life. As scholars of Irish masculinity note, the version of masculinity that became dominant in rural Ireland with the institutionalisation of the stem family emphasised self-sufficiency on the land as the goal of Irish manhood. Embodied in the figure of the small peasant tenant-farmer valorised by cultural nationalists, the institutionalisation of this ideal established ownership of property and the settlement of a family on the land as fundamental conditions of adult male status within rural areas where the stem system predominated. Failure to achieve this ideal, whether through the inheritance of a family farm or the purchase of land, entailed indefinite boyhood.  

In terms of masculine socialization, such norms thus worked to produce material acquisition and the creation of a family as desire at the same time as they worked to preserve gender and class hierarchies. Due, however, to the consolidating logic of inheritance practices and

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94 Denis Heaney, p. 10.

the lack of regular employment at reasonable levels of remuneration, opportunities for the
gratification of such desires within the rural environment were limited and precarious. By
providing access to regular employment, emigration to England in this context represented
an alternative means by which ‘boys’ could achieve an adult male status not afforded them
within the social order at home.

The ‘problem’, from the point of view of conservative critics of emigration, was that
emigration was changing from being an option of last resort to a first preference, due to the
possibilities for material gain in post-war England. This was noted by council officials and
employment exchange officers, who repeatedly reported labour shortages in the semi-state
sector throughout the 1940s, despite national unemployment running at 14%. It was noted
too by the commission on emigration, which would report in 1954 that, although ‘a lack of
opportunities for employment’ represented one major ‘cause’ of increases in emigration, an
enhanced ‘desire for improved material standards’ represented another, this being a function
of ‘a widespread awareness of the existence of opportunities abroad and a realisation of
differences between conditions at home and in other countries’.

As the Commission also noted, ‘the reports of emigrants who returned well dressed and with
an air of prosperity’ played a controversial role in disseminating this awareness, particularly
in relation to the young and impressionable. In his nostalgic memoir The Death of an Irish
Town, first published as a series of articles in The Irish Times in 1967, the journalist John
Healy recalled the stigma attached to the practice of seasonal migration to England in his
native Charlestown before the war. Such migrants, drawn from the ranks of the poorest
farmers and labourers, had been viewed as ‘an inferior breed’ because they could not
support themselves on the land. During wartime, however, when British industrial
mobilisation created new demands for labour, perceptions began to change as the recently
emigrated returned home conquering heroes, garbed anew in the exotic wares appropriated
in foreign lands:

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96 Clarke, Brown Gold, pp. 89-90, documents post-war labour shortages in the turf industry, noting in
particular the counties of Longford, Offaly and Kerry. Indeed, so intractable was the problem that managers
apparently considered the importation of foreign labour.
98 The Commission on Emigration, Reports, p. 137.
He came home at Christmas dressed to the nines, his style paid, Windsor-knotted in the latest spiv fashion and his wallet full of notes. He was a success. The good rearing. A credit to his mother and father. Yes, the money was good, he admitted. And yes, it could be tough. The tough bit was admitted. It was the male ego, a manifestation of the hero of the day and was in the best Jimmy Cagney style.\textsuperscript{99}

To non-inheriting farmers’ sons like Denis, the image of masculine status and success fashioned by returnees through the adornment of full wallets, new suits and slicked hair might excite ambitions to leave for England. To others, such as parish priests and local strong farmers, however, the material success of the emigrant was disruptive of established moral codes and hierarchies. As late as 1965, Fr. R.L. Stevenson was still railing against the ‘top-heavy, out-of-proportion flight from the country of birth’.\textsuperscript{100} While ‘real economic necessity’ was a ‘valid’ reason for leaving, Stevenson suspected that ‘the greater percentage must prove comparatively trivial’.\textsuperscript{101} Indeed, in most cases the problem of ‘dire need’ could ‘be solved at home, given the determination and the will to work with enthusiasm and diligence’:

Too often however, contrary to the Christian tradition that all work is noble, there is a background of false pride which labels certain jobs as ‘menial’, because they entail beginning at the bottom of the ladder.\textsuperscript{102}

As Stevenson fumed, such pride was not only mistaken; it amounted to a gross betrayal of God as well as one’s parental and national family:

It was there God gave you life; good, loving parents and a Christian home. There you were surrounded by kindness and consideration, much of which stemmed from the self-sacrifice of your parents...both your family and the people of Ireland spent thousands of pounds on your housing and clothing, your education and health, and that over a period of seventeen or eighteen years. I don’t suppose there is any likelihood of you ever being in a position to repay that debt, even in part. Have you ever thought of putting anything into the town where you claim there is nothing.\textsuperscript{103}

This negative construct of the selfish and materialistic emigrant was by no means a new one within Irish culture. Some fifty years earlier Patrick Pearse had condemned the emigrant as

\textsuperscript{99}J. Healy, \textit{No One Shouted Stop! The Death of an Irish Town} (The House of Healy, Achill, 1968), p. 44.
\textsuperscript{100}R. L. Stevenson, \textit{Shall I Emigrate?} (Dublin 1965), p. 3.
\textsuperscript{101}Stevenson, \textit{Shall I Emigrate?}, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{102}Stevenson, \textit{Shall I Emigrate?}, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{103}Stevenson, \textit{Shall I Emigrate?}, p. 10.
‘a traitor to the Irish state’ and ‘a fool into the bargain’.

Alert to the jealousies and insecurities aroused within local communities by the apparent prosperity of young emigrants, in the late 1940s Fianna Fail also mobilised the construct to counter the image of ‘forced exile’ promulgated by figures such as O’Donnell, using it to suggest that rising emigration had more to do with the irresponsible ambitions of young emigrants than poor economic management. Speaking on the great ‘national evil’ in the months preceding the 1948 general election, de Valera was baffled as to why anyone would chose to ‘leave the country and go abroad’:

Why some of them go away at all is a marvel to me…they are lead away by the idea that they will get big wages, but it is necessary to look at two sides of your account.…

As de Valera and others within the party reiterated during the period, the ‘two sides of your account’ referred to the effects of one’s actions upon one’s country’s welfare and upon one’s own character, as well as to one’s real earnings. Speaking in reference to the picture of degradation portrayed in a 1951 Christian Workers Report on the moral and social conditions encountered by Irish emigrants in Birmingham, at a jubilee dinner of the Fianna Fail organisation de Valera continued to link the emigrant’s misguided material aspirations with disloyalty and questionable morality:

Not only do they fail to improve their own circumstances by going abroad, but they leave enterprises for the development of our own national resources without sufficient labour to enable progress to be made as rapidly as we would all desire…The saddest part of all this is that work is available at home, and in conditions infinitely better from the point of view of both health and morals.

This stigmatising of the emigrant, taken in relation to both the material circumstances prompting emigration and the conflicting prescriptions associated with competing images of masculine self-realisation, help explain the tensions apparent in Denis’s negotiation of the theme of leaving within his account. For Denis, leaving provided a means of ‘making a living’, that is, of realising a basic masculine imperative and achieving greater status.

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104 Taken from O’Grada, A Rocky Road, p. 212.
106 Eamon de Valera, quoted in, ‘Emigrants Living in “absolute degradation” in parts of Britain’, The Irish Times, August 30, 1951.
through material acquisition. However, even though such an imperative was linked to dominant versions of rural masculinity which equated manhood with property ownership, the same version of masculinity also contained proscriptions against ‘modern’, urban and individuated modes of self-fulfilment. Indeed, at the level of nationalist rhetoric the antithesis of the ideal peasant farmer was the British, urban industrial worker. The stigmatising of the emigrant’s materialistic ambitions amplified this tension within discourses of rural masculinity, producing a moral division between those who stayed and those who left. Denis’s internalisation of this division has created a personal moral conflict between a desire for status, realisable only through leaving, and a desire to conform to opposing masculine prescriptions, achievable only through staying.

The narrative of ‘economic necessity’, as Denis’s way of managing the tension the theme of leaving re-activates, affects his negotiation of this conflict in different ways. From one perspective, through the way it backgrounds the personal agency of the emigrant, the ‘necessity’ narrative permits a splitting-off of the materialistic ambitions condemned by traditional nationalists, establishing emotional distance between the self and the feelings of guilt associated with leaving. From another angle, however, the ‘necessity’ narrative also reinforces the muting effects of condemnatory constructions since it denies the role of individual desire in emigration. Hence the difficulty Denis displays in trying to articulate an explanation for leaving in the first person singular, sandwiched as he is between constructions that deny or denounce the individual ambitions of the emigrant.

In certain respects, the leaving narrative of my second respondent, Brenda, born 1927, was similar to that constructed by Denis. Both respondents grew up on small farms in high emigration counties in the west, Brenda in Galway. Both were from medium sized families, Brenda the third born in a family of 6. Both departed for England, single and aged 19, in the immediate post-war years, Brenda in July 1946. And, as regards the negotiation of leaving in their narratives, both reflected positively, even nostalgically, upon their experiences of growing up in Ireland, reproducing in their memories images and motifs drawn from popular Catholic-nationalist idealisations of Irish rural life. Echoing Denis’s memory of a frugal yet essentially happy rural childhood, Brenda recalled ‘a happy life and even though
Ireland was poor we were never hungry because we always had food from the land and milk’. 107

As the references to food, a recurrent motif in this part of Brenda’ narrative, implies, however, the form of the positive images of rural life constructed by the two respondents differed in important respects too. Where Denis, who tells us nothing about other family members beyond their occupation, presents work as the focus of his narrative, the portrayal of rural life offered by Brenda takes as its spatial referent the family farm. This was presented in idealised form through stories about the nourishing qualities of ‘food from the land’, which contrasted the benefits of ‘the farm’ with the ‘hard living’ endured by those who ‘lived in the town’, and through positive characterisations of parent figures. 108 Such characterisations endeavoured to highlight parents successful performance of the gender roles assigned them within ideal constructions of the respectable Irish family:

Good memories, erm, they were very hard working people, and erm...my mother did a lot of knitting and erm...she’d go out and buy some material and in the morning there’d be a dress made...that was the kind of a life. 109

As gender historians have pointed out, the institutionalisation of the ‘stem’ family in the late nineteenth century was concomitant with a growing separation of the roles of men and women on the family holding, a process related to the switch to imparticable, patrilineal inheritance practices, but also to the growing influence of Catholic and nationalist ideals of the authentic Irish family. 110 As part of these overlapping processes, where masculinity became increasingly associated with the control of property and the performance of work on the land, femininity became associated with the ideals and duties of domesticity, marriage and maternity. Embedded within the space of the family as daughter, wife and mother, feminine practice and identity for rural Irish women thus became intimately bound to the care, support and regulation of familial others, while masculine self-hood was constituted outside the home, through the practices and goals associated with management of the land.

107 Brenda Grady, p. 1.
108 Brenda Grady, pp. 3-4.
109 Brenda Grady, p.1.
Such an ideal gender order was never perfectly realised in practice, of course. During the post-war period in particular, the forms of individuation and disciplining by which such an order was reproduced were increasingly subject to competition and contestation from alternative practices of the self. Nevertheless, as historians such as Maria Luddy have underlined, the female body constituted a constant source of anxiety in the state that emerged after 1922, inciting a defensive public discourse on Irish femininity that sought to protect and valorise the Catholic family in the face of concerns over rising rates of ‘illegitimacy’. For Brenda, who grew up during the late 1920s and 30s, and who recalls a happy home-life, family emerges as a positive site of memory and belonging in her narrative, apparent not only in her choice of the family home as the narrative’s spatial referent, but also in her relational style of narration, by which the story of the self is told through the lives of the various others that inhabit her family-centred world.

Given emigration’s ambivalent status with regard to the family, as a practice which removes women from the interior space of the home yet is necessary for its material reproduction, the experience of leaving proves a complex issue for Brenda to negotiate within the interview:

Brenda: I leaved in 1946 and how it come about, one of my school friends had left quite a number of months before me, and she came over to Lymm in Cheshire, not far from Warrington, to a, I think she was housekeeping, and, (pause) I came over to her then, eh, and, there again now we were looking after children, em, coming to it, em, we were, em, paid, our fare was paid by the government or by the people who we were coming to work with…we had to have passports and identity cards and a visa, and you had to stay on the job 12 months if you liked it or not, if you did leave before the 12 months you had to pay the money back, the fare, and that’s how I came about coming, and then, eh, some more of the girls from the village came over, I think there was about 6 or 7 of us, in a group.

Barry: and, did you want to go?
Brenda: did I want to come to England?
Barry: yeah
Brenda: yes I did
Barry: you did?

111 Clair Willis, for example, has suggested that anxiety around femininity at mid-century may be read as evidence that women were exploring new forms of selfhood that unsettled traditional sources of authority. See C. Wills, ‘Women, Domesticity and the Family: Recent Feminist Work in Irish Cultural Studies’, Cultural Studies 15, 1 (2001), pp. 33-57.

Brenda: yeah, because my oldest brother and, eh, he was sent home money, and money for himself and I sent money home, every week or every two weeks, there was money sent.\textsuperscript{113}

In sharp contrast to Denis’s narrative of leaving, which is focused on ‘making a living’, Brenda’s narrative here incorporates a range of contextual details and the stories of proximate others. We learn not only that Brenda left to take up work, but also about the nature of that work, its location and securement as part of a government scheme, about the documentation Brenda was required to possess and the terms of her contract, and about the friends and ‘girls from the village’ who had followed the same migratory route across to Lymm. One effect of this relational mode is a relative slowing of the narrative pace, enabling a glimpse into how the act of migration for Brenda was experienced as entangled with and contingent upon other circumstances and other people. Just as Brenda’s memories of growing up in rural Galway embed her within the family, so her leaving story envisions her within a migratory network, suggesting how perceptual dispositions habituated within the former context may in turn shape the embodied experience and recollection of leaving.

A second corollary of Brenda’s relational style of narration is the backgrouding of an individuated self, reflected in the proliferation of pronominal forms other than ‘I’. This eschewal of the first person singular means that we are not afforded direct access to Brenda’s interior emotional state: even when invited to disclose her personal feelings about leaving, Brenda explains why she wanted to go in terms of the needs of familial others: she wanted to go so that, like her older brother, she could send money home to her parents. Rather, Brenda’s personal feelings only begin to emerge obliquely, through the repetitious use of passive verb forms, which intimate the extent to which the course of events being narrated was experienced as imposed, and through reference to the affective objects of ‘passports and identity cards and a visa’, documents required until 1948 under travel restrictions instituted during wartime.\textsuperscript{114} Unlike earlier references to ‘food’ and ‘milk’, these objects are referred to in the second-person, inhabiting an estranged relation to the self. Recalled in relation to the process of border-crossing, they evoke otherness and de-personalisation rather than security and nourishment.

\textsuperscript{113} Brenda Grady, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{114} C. Wills, That Neutral Island. A History of Ireland During the Second World War (Faber and Faber, London, 2008), p. 318.
Brenda’s narrative here thus appears to make audible two distinct and potentially conflicting voices. On the one hand, leaving is presented as desired; on the other, the narrative exudes feelings of powerlessness which suggest the experience was imposed. One way of explaining this tension concerns a perceived conflict between the imperatives of the stem family economy as they connect with the performance of the subject-position of the obedient daughter, and the dominant ideal of Irish femininity more generally, which defines self-fulfilment for women in terms of marriage and motherhood and a life within the domestic sphere of the rural homestead. I asked Brenda why she though emigration was so common in Ireland at the time:

Well there was big families, and eh, the money, aye, the work and at all and there wasn’t the money around because…dun’ get wages or anything that they were like here, and em, if there was 5 or 6 in some families there might be 12 or 13, there wasn’t room for everybody, em, one’d come and the other’s followed ‘em.\(^\text{115}\)

In Brenda’s understanding emigration is viewed as something beyond the control of the individual, bound up with ‘big families’, a lack of work, and the structure of rural society more generally. Reflecting an understanding of emigration as a ‘familial survival strategy’, deployed to reduce overcrowding, Brenda explains the causes of emigration by reference to the fact that ‘there wasn’t room for everybody’: sons and daughters, whether they wanted to or not, had in many cases to emigrate in order to ensure continuity on the land. Thus, emigration is understood by Brenda in terms of a notion of duty, which appears in this instance to leave little room for the expression of personal feelings. Indeed, since a ‘good daughter’ would instinctively want to help her parents, and since sending home remittances represented a key strategy of survival for small family farms, so Brenda is under duress to experience emigration as desire.

However, as Brenda pointed out, leaving was not expected of everyone:

I think the men, they mostly worked on the farm with their father and the ones who didn’t work on the farm came away to England, and the girls, sometimes they might get married off into another farmer, yeah, if the money was in the home to get them to go into the other home.\(^\text{116}\)

\(^{115}\) Brenda Grady, p. 2.

\(^{116}\) Brenda Grady, p. 3.
'Sometimes’, as Brenda states, ‘if the money was in the home’, ‘girls’ could avoid emigration by becoming the wife of a farmer, thus allowing them to remain within the home. Such an aspiration, ‘to go into another farmhouse’ and so embody the ideal her mother represented, was in fact harboured by Brenda herself:

I was courting a person, a lad over there, and ah, if you got married over there, in them days you had to have money to go into another farm house, and this boy was very nice, and we liked each other, but eh, his brothers and sisters are having three hundred pounds.\textsuperscript{117}

Because ‘his brothers and sisters are having three hundred pounds’, Brenda’s desire ‘to go into another farmhouse’ could not be fulfilled. Significantly, the issue of Brenda’s own dowry, which reflected a daughter’s ‘worth’ and was usually a pre-requisite of marriage on the land, is omitted in her account. The reason for this would appear to be that she was not the daughter chosen to receive one:

The other, my sister, oldest sister, she more or less was mammy’s pet and she always helped her in the house and that, and I was the third one and as I said I went out to work.\textsuperscript{118}

Being ‘the third one’ and so further down the sibling hierarchy, Brenda ‘went out to work’, initially as a child carer in a neighbouring farmhouse, one of the few forms of employment available to young women in rural areas. By contrast, her oldest sister, who later married on the land and so presumably received the family dowry, was afforded the opportunity to remain within the home helping her mother. As the characterisation ‘mammy’s pet’ suggests, however, Brenda viewed her sister’s privilege with some jealousy, insinuating her own preference for this role alongside her mother within the family home, a role which would have improved her chances of marrying on the land.

So emigration for Brenda was not a personal first-choice, but involved putting the needs of her family before her own desires. This involved, as we have seen, an attempt to suppress a sense of alienation occasioned by the act of leaving. As Brenda approaches the moment of embarkation when recalling the day of her leave-taking, however, her ability to suppress this voice becomes increasingly impaired:

\textsuperscript{117} Brenda Grady, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{118} Brenda Grady, p. 1.
Barry: what sticks out in your mind about that, that day?

Brenda: well erm...there again, I was just 19 and erm..came to Athenry, the Fields of Athenry [laughs] I came to the...(wispering) to that station with my father and my mother and that was quite sad to say goodbye to them ...(pause as Brenda wipes tears from her eyes and gathers herself)...and I was met at Dublin, by some person, a man, and...there was a lot of other girls from different parts of Ireland but I didn’t know any of them and a special hotel we stayed in..and we had to have a medical..and if you were dirty or had lice or anything like that, you had to go for a bath and your clothes would be fumigated....and all that..before....and in the morning, we went to the boat and I was met in Holyhead, by erm..the people I was going to work for...because they were in Wales at the time because it was the week of the 12 July, my brother was home from erm..Belfast, he was living there then, and he was quite upset about me coming as well, yeah...

In 1943, following an outbreak of typhus in the west of Ireland, the British and Irish authorities established temporary embarkation regulations requiring boat passengers travelling from Ireland to England to be disinfected in Dublin prior to boarding. Narrated as an accelerating stream of consciousness, Brenda recalls this process as a procedure of de-personalisation, occasioning disintegration of the first-person voice as she traverses the boundary between home and away, self and other. This loss of self has to do in the first instance with what is being left behind: the poignant image of Brenda, ‘only 19’, leaving her parents at the station evokes heart-break at having to leave them and the family-centred world they represent. The raw emotions that seep into Brenda’s narrative here, as she laughs nervously then breaks down momentarily, represent the embodied effects of the rupturing of the emotional bonds that tied her to her family, the release of suppressed resistance to leaving a world that had become deeply embedded within the self. The depersonalisation and dissolution that ensues is vividly depicted in the image of a vulnerable young Brenda arriving in Dublin on her own, only to be met by strangers, ‘some person’ and girls she ‘didn’t know’, and the prospect, ‘if you were dirty or had lice’, of de-lousing and fumigation.

Brenda’s narrative here summons the semantic field of exile. This is apparent in her depiction of the de-humanising embarkation process, which recalls the notorious treatment of Irish emigrants at Ellis Island, New York, during the post-Famine years, and more directly in her reference to the popular ballad ‘The Fields of Athenry’. Although this ballad was composed in 1979 and tells of forced departure during The Famine, Brenda’s reference

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119 Brenda Grady, p. 5.
120 Wills, That Neutral Island, pp. 319-320.
to it, triggered by her memory of saying goodbye to her parents at ‘Athenry Station’, is important because it indicates a paradigmatic association between the themes and emotions evoked in the song’s lyrics and Brenda’s own understanding of her experience:

By the lonely prison wall.
I heard a young girl calling
Michael they are taking you away,
For you stole Trevelyan's corn.
So the young might see the morn.
Now a prison ship lies waiting in the bay.

Low, lie the fields of Athenry,
Where once we watched the small free birds fly.
Our love was on the wing,
We had dreams and songs to sing.
It's so lonely round the fields of Athenry.121

For Brenda, the publicly recognised story of exile made available a legitimate subject-position and explanation through which the felt disempowerments, injustices and losses of her own personal predicament could be understood and obliquely expressed without transgressing the prohibition on the expression of individual desire embedded within dominant conceptions of the obedient daughter. Put differently, there is a degree of confluence, based on shared themes of powerlessness, stoic suffering and the glorification of victimhood, between the figure of the exile and that of the martyr that here facilitates the transformation of feelings of jealousy and anger into sadness and loss, and that in turn affords Brenda a means of disclosing these feelings. There is thus a complex strategy of composure at work here: despite leaving having been a disempowering experience for Brenda, by framing this experience within the story of exile she is able to make sense of it in a way that connects it with public and shared understandings while preserving a positive memory of her parents and life growing up in rural Ireland. The recognition this affords enables a kind of composure in that the tension between emigration and the regulatory ideals of femininity, however imperfectly, can be narratively mediated, allowing a coherent understanding to be synthesised.

Narratives of escape and self-realisation: quest structures in memories of leaving

A shared feature of Brenda and Denis’s narratives was a positive, even nostalgic, view of life in rural Ireland, followed by a presentation of leaving that tended to background the agency of the self in this process. Other popular discourses on emigration during the period, however, inverted this structure, presenting emigration as a voluntary flight from a restrictive rural milieu to a modern exterior world of new possibilities.

As noted above, contemporaries repeatedly expressed concern over a perceived devaluation of the attractiveness of rural life, particularly amongst the young. For the farmer’s son, the prestige and honour associated with inheritance and the tenant-farmer ideal had to be weighed against the deprivations involved in realising that ideal, viewed in relation to the opportunities for independence, status, excitement and success apparently on offer just a short boat-journey away. And these deprivations, powerfully indicted in Patrick Kavanagh’s 1942 poem ‘The Great Hunger’ as signalling the imaginative impotence and ultimate decay of the rural idyll within Irish culture, were not inconsiderable. In the first instance, a son could not acquire such status as might be offered until he took control of the family holding, at which point he might marry. Since, however, the father’s own authority within the family and locale depended upon retaining control of the farm, and since he often decided when and whom his son should marry, so the son’s wait for independence and marriage was frequently protracted. In the meantime, the son lived out an extended ‘boyhood’ of low status and few personal possessions and freedoms, defined by obedience to his father and hard, unpaid labour on the land.122 In Kavanagh’s bleak portrayal, this protracted boyhood ultimately results in Patrick Maguire, the poem’s central character, living out his days alone, an emotionally starved bachelor on a solitary farmstead.123

The disfiguring of the official ideal of rural masculinity enacted through texts like ‘The Great Hunger’ occurred in dialogue with alternative images of identity associated with the ‘modern’, which, despite the state’s efforts at censorship, were increasingly able to permeate Irish popular culture. Such images were smuggled in via the silver screen and popular foreign fiction, and of course via the emigrant, who returned home on holidays wealthy,

fashionably dressed, and with a store of stories recounting the excitements and pleasures of the city. As we have seen, this figure aroused the antipathy of religious elites and cultural nationalists, but for others during the period the modern aspirations of the emigrant appeared entirely rational, even commendable. An article by a member of the public published in *The Bell* in 1946 pondered the issue of whether wartime migrants to Britain would return in the post-war period. According to the author, a V. McGuire of Pembroke Park, Dublin, while many emigrants had been ‘driven’ to leave due to ‘economic stress at home’, ‘many others’ left ‘because they found life in Ireland unsatisfying’:

One does not wish to remain in a land of ghosts. One wants to live where people are thinking and developing, where there is movement and progress, where new ideas and ideals are being born and fought for, where there is some vision, where in a word there is a future for the young and enterprising, and a chance for the worker, whether he be a labourer or an intellectual, to play a part in shaping a better world. One does not find any of these things in Ireland today, and there does not, at the moment, seem to be any likelihood of finding them in the near future either. Most of the enterprising, the young and vigorous have gone, the less enterprising, the aging and the very young remain.  

Published here no doubt because it chimed faithfully with the editor, Sean O’Faolain’s, own view of emigration, this construction of the emigrant as ‘enterprising’ and ‘vigorous’ became a common trope within the discourse of an urban, liberal intelligentsia writing in journals such as *The Bell* and *Dublin Opinion*, as well as *The Irish Times* during the 1940s and 50s. Perceiving themselves as marginalised within the Catholic-nationalist settlement and aligned against the separatist, anti-modern code of national identity embodied in the figure of the peasant farmer, these actors were engaged over the period in an attempt to delegitimise the established political order and institutionalise an alternative vision of Irish modernity, a project which would begin to show signs of success from the late 1950s. During the 1940s and 50s, as part of the prosecution of an argument for modernisation and economic liberalisation, figures such as O’Faolain idealised the independent initiative and ambition of the ‘new’ emigrant, who rejected the limitations of a culture rendered stagnant by a regressive church and state in pursuit of personal success in a modern, technologically advanced world. In this way, the body of the emigrant became the repository for a third form of political desire, namely that of the urban, liberal intelligentsia for a modern, enterprising Ireland.

This construction of the ambitious emigrant, constrained by the limitations of a regressive culture, supplied a framework for the leaving narrative constructed by my third respondent, Bill. Bill was born in 1951 in Roscommon in the west of Ireland, a rural region heavily affected by emigration over the period. Bill’s family, in which he was the eldest of 4 siblings (2 boys, 2 girls), owned and worked themselves a 50 acre mixed farm, which provided for an adequate standard of living. Bill attended the local national school until age 13 at which point he ‘went straight onto the land’ while his younger brother stayed on to complete a vocational education until age 16, eventually training as an electrician.126 Thus Bill, as the eldest, had been chosen to follow in his father’s footsteps and inherit the family farm.

For Bill, however, this honour was not viewed in a positive light. In contrast to Denis, who equated work on the land with ‘freedom’ and ‘craic’, work in Bill’s second-person narrative is associated with exploitation, backwardness and constraint, frustrating the young self’s desire for play and competitive endeavour:

Everything was so manual, you didn’t have any tractors, you had a donkey and cart and that was it. Every… everything was done by, you know, by hand, erm… and you know, it was hard work, very, very hard work…. It wasn’t enjoyable. It was necessity [laughs], you know. Work had to be done, and it wasn’t that, er… you know… When you’re thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, you want to be out playing football and, and doing that type of thing.127

In Bill’s view, the burdens imposed by the difficult nature of farm work were not shared equally amongst all members of the family. He emphasised that, ‘as far as the farming was concerned, if you were the eldest you did most of the work and the milking’.128 In Bill’s case this distribution of responsibility turned out to be particularly burdensome, partly because Bill’s father typically spent 6 months of the year in England working, but also because his father’s drinking habits, when he was at home, often meant Bill was left to do all the work on his own: ‘I didn’t have good memories… of, you know, even when my father and mother was there, that my father would go out on the beer, and… day drinking

126 Bill Duffy, p. 1.
127 Bill Duffy, p. 2.
‘til… ten, twelve, one o’clock in the morning.’ Perhaps for these reasons, Bill began to recognise his own ambitions through the masculine image projected by different ‘forefathers’, men who had ‘gone to England’ and done ‘very well’:

You know… all you’d seen was your forefathers and your uncles and all that, they’d gone to England, and had made living, and you’d see them come back on holidays, and other people coming back on holidays and… and doing well, and other people, you know, not doing so well, but lots of them doing very, very well, coming back on holidays and you’d see big cars with them, and well dressed and plenty of money, which I hadn’t…

Recalling the image of style and success projected by holidaying forefathers, Bill realised that ‘if I worked… as hard as I worked on the farm, I’d make a living, and that’s exactly what… you know, what I did’. As such, Bill left for Manchester to take a job in the construction industry in January 1967, aged 16. Bill’s narration of this event and those immediately preceding it reveals a distinct form of composure at work in his narrative of leaving:

Well, the days before I left… was… my father had come over from England, home, and we were cleaning out some barns, for to put the cattle in over the winter, was alright, the weather was alright. But, in the… in the barns, from the year before, the… er… erm… straw and all that was in the barns was gone hard, it was… well you had… and that had to be cleaned right down to the bottom. And the only way you could clean that was with the shovel, to cut it all the way round, and throw it out into the cart, and take it away. Myself and my father… he came back as I said about… December the tenth, twelfth, whatever it was, and was about fifteenth or sixteenth of December he says to me, “We’ll clean out that barn today.” I say, “Sound.” So we went out the two of us and… and he says, “Now here… look here young fella,” he says, “There’s no place for me… me or you here. One of us will have to go. Either you… or I’ll go.” And, er… well, “There’s no place for the two of us here.” So I said nothing, and he said, “Sound, sound.” So… when my mates came back from England, er… at Christmas they came back maybe four, five days before Christmas, I said to them, they took me to the dances and… which was, you know… we weren’t sent to the dances, I wouldn’t go to the dances that much. But anyway, went out with them and… they were home and they had a… a Mini, you know. A young lad and er… er, plenty of money, and well-dressed, suits and all. Anyway. Went to the, what do you call it? And one of them said to me, “Why don’t you come to England with us, when we’re going back?” And I says, “Jeez, I might!” I says. So anyway, that was two or three days, so… on Boxing Night… as they call it, St Stephen’s Night, as they call it down in the… west of Ireland, the

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129 Bill Duffy, p. 9.
130 Bill Duffy, p. 5.
boys… We went out and… I came back, and my father was obviously out in the pub, and… came back and the two of them was in bed, my father and mother, the Lord have mercy on them. They’re dead now. And… I went up to the room and I says, “Look it. On the seventh of January, I’m going to England.” This was, as I said, three o’clock, two, three ‘o clock in the morning, “with… PJ and Ambrose McLoughlin.” My father says, “Go on down to bed!” he says, “I’ll talk to you in the morning.” Anyway, got up in the morning, and… he says, er, “Now then,” he says, “what are you on about?” I says, “I’m going to England on the seventh.” He says, “Are you?” “Yep.” So… my mother was there, crying, and, and… yeah, I says, “Yes, I’m… I’m going with them on the seventh.” “Well you’ve no suit, you’ll have to come… and, and… clothes.” So I went and cycled, er… nine mile to Castlerea, which was the… local, well… was the postal address town… and, to get a suit. And er, clothes, and er… packed everything in the case, and headed on the seventh for Manchester.131

Set as the old year gives way to the new, at one level this story is about the transitions from boyhood to manhood, farm labourer to ‘modern’ worker, where the constraints implied by the former status are overcome, enabling the protagonist to pursue his personal ambitions. In the first stage of the narrative, set in the outhouses of the family farm which, it may be suggested, symbolise tradition, continuity and Bill’s filial duties, Bill is positioned in the subordinate and dependent role of son and farm hand. The action in the scene in controlled by Bill’s father, who determines when the barn will be cleaned and who presents Bill with the opportunity to leave. At this stage in the narrative, Bill does not articulate his desire to leave (though this is implied in the description of the old barn straw, which is suggestive of Bill’s sense of his life on the farm as having gone stale and in need of change). One reading of Bill’s silence here is that Bill’s father’s offer conflicts with his need to authorise his own destiny: leaving because your father permits you is not the same as staking your own claim. Alternatively, Bill wants to avoid being characterised as an irresponsible son, who abandons his family the first chance he gets. A third possibility is that Bill, while obviously considering the possibility, has not yet fully made up his mind.

Whatever the case, the scene ends with convention and order intact. However, in the next stage of the narrative this order is disrupted with the return of Bill’s friends from England. Symbolising in their appearance (‘plenty of money, and well dressed, suits and all’) affluence, independence and style, their return activates Bill’s desire to leave and moves the

131 Bill Duffy, pp. 7-8.
action forward, culminating in the drama of Bill’s boxing night declaration of his intention to leave. The key act of self-assertion and pivot in the narrative, this marks the moment when Bill transcends the constraints of the old order and stakes his claim to autonomy: ‘I went up to the room and I says, “Look it. On the seventh of January, I’m going to England”’. Bill having been ordered to bed by his father, a note of suspense is introduced as the action is held in abeyance until the scheduled reopening of the issue the following morning. The final stage of the narrative resolves this tension as Bill’s bid is upheld. Under questioning by his father Bill reasserts his determination to go and his father acquiesces, giving him money for the journey and buying him ‘a suit’. This finalises Bill ‘victory’ over the imposed constraints of life in rural Ireland and his transition from son of a farmer to ‘man of the world’.

However, despite Bill’s ultimate ‘victory’, it is important to emphasise the negotiated character of this narrative: while, on this reading, the narrative is about Bill’s rejection of one sort of identity for another, this process does not occur without reference to Bill’s father, directing us to read for symptoms of oedipal tension. Although Bill’s father embodies in his narrative the constraints he wishes to transgress, his father’s acceptance and facilitation of his emigration ultimately relieves him of the obligations of the father-son relationship and recognises his right, as an autonomous agent, to choose his own identity. Bill father’s supportive actions, in other words, help resolve the conflict implied by Bill’s rejection of the ‘honour’ of inheritance, allowing Bill to remember leaving in a positive and affirmative way, that is, relatively free from guilt. In turn, this memory of his father’s affirmative actions may also help Bill to construct a more positive memory of his father more generally, as having finally acted in an unselfish way. In this way an equilibrium is achieved: as well as being about the assertion of a new identity, leaving is also an occasion of reconciliation, a rite of passage that involves a working-through of the oedipal drama.

An important comparative question here remains, however. The liberal construction of the ambitious emigrant provides a subject-position through which Bill can express his dissatisfaction with life on the farm and assert a personal desire for material wealth and its trappings. Why, however, did Denis not take-up this subject-position, in order to give expression to his own muted aspirations? One way of responding here is that Denis’s dis-identification with older conceptions of rural masculinity is less complete than is Bill’s. Whereas the heavy burdens Bill had to shoulder on the farm and the example set by his
father engendered a disposition against the life embodied in the figure of the peasant-farmer. Denis continued to identify with the values associated with this figure. Thus, the idea of the rejection of a restrictive culture contained within the liberal narrative resonated more closely with Bill’s interpretation of his experience. A second, related point is that where the liberal construction represented only one of a number of competing understandings of the emigrant in the 1940s, by the time of Bill’s leaving in 1967 emigration had become a less contested theme within public discourse. In large measure, this was because, in the context of mass emigration during the mid to late 1950s and important shifts within Irish political culture, a version of the liberal understanding, the rational economic actor who migrates to maximise earnings, had become institutionalised as ‘expert’ knowledge within public discourse.

A basic framing concept for the social scientists who produced the 1954 report of the Commission on Emigration, the construction served to qualify the popular view of emigration as ‘exile’ while normalising ‘the growing desire for higher standards of living on the part of the community’. Speaking in May 1954, RC Geary, head of the Irish Central Statistics Office and chief statistician on the Commission, suggested that the trope of ‘exile’ distorted the reality of demographic processes, asserting that there was ‘no good reason that the nation should have a guilt complex about the fact of emigration’:

It is high time that the Irish people examined the validity of their traditional attitude towards emigration. This attitude is largely an inheritance from the long period of the struggle for independence. It was then an effective political argument... it is quite otherwise today. It is reasonable and proper to aspire to a reduction in emigration; it is quite another matter to regard all emigration as bad.

By the 1960s, the distinction invoked here by Geary between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ emigration had become a legitimate discursive option for members of Sean Lemass’s new modernising elite. Where the emigration of the past had been ‘bad’ because it was a product of economic necessity, the reduced numbers emigrating in the 1960s, in the context of an upturn in the Irish economy, constituted ‘good’ emigration, ‘good’ because such emigrants were voluntary economic actors, leaving to maximise earnings. ‘In a world of jet travel and movement’, declared Donny O’Malley, minister for education in 1966, the state was

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132 Commission on Emigration, Reports, p. 135.
obligated to provide citizens ‘with the choice they are entitled to, as citizens of the world’, that is, with the choice to ‘emigrate not because they have to, but because they want to’.  

The suggestion, therefore, is that emigration for material advancement was publically acceptable in 1967 in a way it was not in 1948, enabling in Bill’s case a form of recognition that was not available to Denis.

A final issue to be explored in this section concerns the relation between the quest structure deployed within the liberal discourse on emigration and Irish femininity. As noted, historians such as Maria Luddy have highlighted how women’s bodies became the target of an extensive conservative discourse in the decades after independence. As other writers have suggested, however, the anxieties prompting church and state to regulate femininity were themselves the product of a widespread perception that young women in particular were engaging in forms of practice that endangered their ‘natural vocation’ as Irish wives and mothers. Along with the consumption of ‘modern’ leisure forms and young women’s increasing performance of new forms of paid labour, the church in particular identified emigration to ‘pagan England’ as a threat to Irish womanhood, and would seek on a number of occasions to have legal restrictions imposed on the emigration of the youngest women.

The church’s condemnation of female emigration, as of the cinema, romantic fiction, and dancing, implicitly recognised that young women’s participation in these practices was engendering forms of feminine desire that potentially conflicted with its own project of preserving the Catholic family with ‘woman’ at its centre. First published in 1960, Edna O’Brien’s autobiographical coming-of-age novel, *The Country Girls*, presents a striking portrayal of the transitional nature of femininity in post-war Ireland, telling of its two heroines, Cait Brady and Baba Brennan’s, escape from the claustrophobic west of Ireland village of their childhood to the ‘crowds and lights and noise’ of Dublin in 1952, aged 17. Narrated throughout from the first-person perspective of Cait, the first phase of the story depicts with tenderness and bitterness her unhappy childhood world as an only daughter.

135 See Wills, ‘Women, domesticity and the family’, p. 51.
136 In both 1947 and 1964 the Hierarchy lobbied for restrictions to be imposed on young emigrants below some unspecified age. See O’ Grada, *A Rocky Road*, p. 212.
growing up on her father’s sizable but decaying farm. The source of this unhappiness is Cait’s feckless, drunken and violent father, whose episodic bouts of heavy drinking fatally impoverishes the farm, in the process enslaving Cait’s mother, the object of a deep sense of pity and regret as well as tender love for the young Cait.

The first key transitional moment in the story is the death of Cait’s mother, who is killed by a boating accident when Cait is fourteen. This event deeply traumatizes the young Cait and the narrative thereafter repeatedly returns to grieve the aching loss it has incurred. It also, however, signals ‘the last day of childhood’ and initiates a new phase in the development of the young self, which sees her establish physical and emotional distance from the scene of her childhood and the ideal of passive feminine suffering this place represents.\footnote{O’Brien, \textit{The Country Girls}, p. 53.} When Jack Holland, a duplicitous local greengrocer who buys up Cait’s old home following its repossession by the bank, offers Cait, now boarding at a convent school, the opportunity to ‘return and inherit your mother’s home and carry on her admirable domestic tradition’, her instinctive response is derision:

I wondered if he was going to give the place back to me; but then another thought flitted across my mind and I laughed to myself.\footnote{O’Brien, \textit{The Country Girls}, p. 90.}

Instead, following their self-engineered expulsion from their convent school in March 1952, aged 17, Cait and Baba leave ‘the old village’ for Dublin, Baba to take a ‘commercial course’, Cait to work as a shop assistant in a greengrocer. Here, the girls live out, in their distinctive ways, the ideal of the modern, independent woman as depicted in Hollywood films and British girl’s magazines, working during the day and pursuing romantic adventures in Dublin’s bars and dancehalls at night. Cait’s relocation to the city thus marks a final phase (in this book) in the transformation of youthful subjectivity, where the possibilities evoked by the urban landscape, for independence, excitement and romance, are finally deciphered as realisable ideals of the self:

‘Jesus, we’re living at last,’ she [Baba] said. She was looking round to see if there were any nice boys at the other tables. ‘It’s nice,’ I said. I meant it. I knew now that this was the place I wanted to be. For evermore I would be restless for crowds and lights and noise. I had gone
from the sad noises, the lonely rain pelting on the galvanised roof of the chicken-house; the moans of a cow in the night, when her calf was being born under a tree.  

In the post-war decades, a period when a growing number of women were abandoning women’s ‘traditional’, low-status working roles within agriculture and domestic service in favour of ‘modern’ jobs in light industry, the professions, secretarial and white-collar work, and in retail and shop service, the narrative of escape from patriarchal control constructed within The Country Girls frequently served as an explanatory framework for public figures speculating on the demographic transition then underway in Ireland. As the popular novelist Bryan MacMahon put it in The Vanishing Irish, ‘girls growing up see their mothers living in what they conceive to be slavery’. Another contributor, Katherine Norris, pondered the notion that ‘Irishwomen’, like Catholic and Irish Catholic women in America, ‘assume marital responsibilities more seriously than all others’ since ‘they realise that their burdens as wives cannot be lightened either by contraception or by divorce’. A young women growing up in conditions of poverty and overcrowding perceives the weightiness of such burdens, seeing ‘only the disorder, the accumulating washing of small clothes and dishes, the cramped quarters growing evermore cramped’. Often, ‘intemperance colours the early picture too. Too many children’s thoughts of Dad and drink are forever united’. Consequently, marriage is delayed ‘each later year’, ‘increasing satisfaction in independence and self-respect, increasing misgivings as to the matrimonial state’.

Emigration to English cities, as such Liberal observers recognised, was intimately related to these processes. Commenting on the rising number of young women emigrating in 1951 in The Irish Times, Maureen C. Ahern of Limerick viewed an attitude of ‘absolute disregard for women, except as child bearers and unpaid labour’ as chiefly responsible for accelerated female emigration. This attitude:

…stains rural life in every way. It emanates from priests, from husbands, from many men with the ability and influence to lessen the boredom and drudgery of women’s lot in many

parts of Ireland, of which Dublin knows nothing. From this lack of consideration of their needs, the lack of companionship, the lack of status, girls go to places where they can find something better. More power to them!" 144

This narrative, of escape from patriarchal authority in pursuit of ‘something better’, framed the leaving memory of my fourth respondent, Clare, born 1940, the youngest girl in a family of three daughters and two sons. Unlike Denis, Brenda and Bill, each of whom grew up on small farms, Clare’s father was a guard for the Garda Síochána, the Irish police force, and as a result her family were, as she put it, ‘a little bit, er, nomadic’ due to her father being posted to different villages in the North Cork area at different points during her childhood. 145 Dissatisfaction with this pattern of mobility was accompanied in Clare’s narrative with dissatisfaction regarding her experiences at school (even though, as she emphasised, she ‘never really had to move schools once I started junior school’). 146 Although Clare ‘loved going to school’ and was ‘quite bright’, poor teaching practices were ‘widespread’. Many teachers ‘ridiculed kids that weren’t bright’ while others enacted physical violence upon students such that ‘we used to kind of live in…quite live in dread of teachers really, we used to tremble’. Perhaps most unsatisfactory from the point of view of the present, narrating self, ‘our parents had no liaison at all with school teachers’ so that ‘they didn’t know what progress or what lack of progress their kids were making’.

When Clare became ill in the month before her ‘primary search’, a final year exam which determined students’ subsequent academic trajectory, this lack of correspondence between home and school had serious implications for Clare’s own ‘progress’ and ambitions for the future. Because ‘there was no liaison with the teachers, there was no sending me down homework to do’, the result being that Clare did not feel confident about sitting the exam in June: ‘I wouldn’t go ‘cos I was terrified’. 147 Clare ‘went back the following year’ to sit the exams, ‘but then I…all my friends had moved on, and I was in a different class’. At this point, and without clarification of the exam results, Clare’s family moves to Kanturk and Clare starts at the local vocational school where ‘you did commerce and I learned to…did shorthand and typing’. Although these subjects made for a ‘good career’, Clare emphasised that:

144 ‘Letters to the Editor: Emigration’, The Irish Times, September 11, 1951.
145 Clare Cullen, p. 1.
146 Clare Cullen, p. 2.
147 Clare Cullen, p. 5.
‘I would’ve liked a more academic schooling. I would’ve loved to do the, you know, to do literature and to... I didn’t do any Shakespeare. My sisters did all of them, ‘cos they had gone to... they were lucky enough... we had a secondary school when they were all in the village. ‘Twas private, but then it closed down. So they kind of benefit... benefitted from that, and I used to sit, and listening to them, you know, learning their Shakespeare off by heart and... and I, I, I wanted that, but we didn’t do that in vocational school’.  

In contrast to Denis, Brenda and Bill, none of whom spoke at great length about school within their interviews, Clare clearly valued education as an avenue of self-development. As the last extract suggests, this may have had something to do with the example set by her older sisters, who were afforded the opportunity to complete an academic schooling at a private secondary school. In this respect, Clare’s family were distinct from either of Brenda, Denis or Bill, as no one amongst their brothers or sisters completed an academic education, which tended to be the preserve of better-off families up until the 1960s. In Clare’s case, her sisters’ accumulation of this form of cultural capital appears to have shaped her own aspirations and expectations in such a way that their accomplishments in an institutional space beyond the home became an ideal of the self.

At the same time, Clare’s investment in versions of self constituted beyond the home may also have been a way of managing tensions within it. While Clare’s mother is hardly mentioned in her account, her father, who ‘was six feet five’, was repeatedly referred to as a distant, imposing and authoritarian figure: ‘We never spoke to my father much, he’d just come and went and you were quiet when he was around, and...He was the boss and that’. When, moreover, Clare’s father was around, his drinking ‘binges’ often resulted in violent behaviour, causing Clare to fear for the family’s reputation:

I used to sometimes be frightened to have any of my friends in the house, because I just wondered what kind of mood he was going to come in... in, you know. So, like today, those things wouldn’t happen, my mother would have probably left him, but in those days you didn’t do it, you know.

Unlike her mother, however, Clare was ultimately able to locate a route out of this situation. In addition to her father’s violent moods within the home, the restrictions he imposed on Clare’s social life outside of it during her teenage years became increasingly intolerable. As

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148 Clare Cullen, p. 5.
149 Clare Cullen, p. 2.
150 Clare Cullen, pp. 10-11.
a result, without even looking for a job locally, Clare decided to go to London in 1957, aged 17:

Some of my friends were only thirteen or fourteen, and they used to go to the dances ‘cos they were allowed, but my father wouldn’t allow me to go anywhere. This was one of the reasons I left home really. I can really say I didn’t leave to find a job. I just wanted to get away, and wanted to get away from him. And I wanted to see the bright lights of London. I thought it was so… you know… just so… I just wanted to do rid of it, to get away, to see something else, you know… travel… so, I never really looked for a job.  

As Clare explains, leaving for her had nothing to do with a lack of job opportunities in Ireland or the lack of a dowry, but was understood as an effort to escape her father’s attempts to regulate her behaviour and pursue a new future. In sharp contrast to Brenda’s narrative, in which leaving is both a familial duty and a reluctant journey away from a key site of belonging, leaving for Clare is about resistance to patriarchal control and the assumption of a new self. The aspirations of this new self are embodied in the objects ‘travel’ and ‘the bright lights of London’, but also in the figure of Clare’s older sister, a ‘qualified nurse’ with ‘her own flat’ in London. Clare’s sister thus not only supplied a role model to emulate, but a place for her to come to once she arrived in the city.

In common with Denis, then, Clare’s narrative of leaving appears to be about self-assertion and the assumption of a new self. On further inspection, however, the success of the narrative composed in splitting the rejected past from the version of self Clare aspires to appears less than absolute. Although, as Clare subsequently states, she was ‘excited at the idea of coming to London’, she was also ‘very homesick’. At the time, these ‘emotions’ were not permitted expression because ‘we were brought up not to show our emotions’. For the present self, this failure of her parents to recognise the emotional significance the young self attached to leaving remains a source of conflict:

**Barry:** What about your father, what, he didn’t object or…?

**Clare:** No, nope. I mean I didn’t… I don’t… all… all our… I remember he first said to me, “Oh I believe you’re going across the pond when Shona comes home?” And I said, “Yeah”, and that was it, you know. And, er… its… I just wish that they had, kind of… they never sat you down and tried to advise you, or say, “Try it and come

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151 Clare Cullen, p. 7.
152 Clare Cullen, p. 10.
back if you don’t like it”, there was never any of that. You went, and that was it. There was no return, you know. 153

Clare’s presentation here of her parents’ indifference to her decision to leave affirms a view of her home-life as one in which her emotional needs were not being met by her parents. In, however, expressing a ‘wish’ that things could have been otherwise, in effect that her parents had expressed a desire for her stay, Clare makes audible a second voice that potentially undermines the image of self-assertion projected through her initial story of leaving. In contrast to that first voice, this second voice speaks of personal rejection, intimating an unfulfilled desire for closer filial relations and familial belonging.

Clare’s leaving narrative thus manifests opposing desires for independence and familial belonging. In the post-war period, different versions of the liberal discourse on female emigration frequently presented the transformation of femininity associated with this process in ways that appeared to integrate opposing ideals of independence and family, modernity and tradition. As the novelist Bryan McMahon recalled, what transfixed the watching eyes of local girls when a young emigrant returned with her new husband one Sunday after a few years in England was the visual display of empowerment, material and sexual, she projected as she took her seat in church:

Last Sunday at church, just as the priest was about to come to the altar, a girl, faultlessly dressed, minced up the passageway seeking a place, her young, well-dressed husband close behind her. With a start I recognized her. She was a maid who had left our town for England some years before, being then gawkish and shy. To all intents she was now a lady! As she passed the pews, the young girls of our town became brilliantly alert. The incident was a sermon without words. 154

The ‘faultlessly dressed’ returnee searching for a seat in her local church marries ideas of old and new in an image where femininity is assertive, empowered and ‘modern’ within marriage, within the space of the church. In Clare’s narrative, by contrast, the tension between competing desires for familial security and self-empowerment remains unresolved. While the quest narrative through which Clare narrates her experiences affords a position from which to express dissatisfaction with her past in Ireland as well as a desire for personal freedom, conflicting emotions of loss, regret and vulnerability are difficult to incorporate

153 Clare Cullen, p. 11.
154 McMahon, ‘On the High Road Again’, p. 207.
within this formula’s linear structure without contradiction. In short, if leaving represents a moment of transformation in Clare’s narrative, through which she stakes a claim to a more empowered self, this transformation leaves unresolved persisting feelings of rejection stemming from her parent’s failure to recognise the needs and desires of the young self.

**Dis/composing the emigrant self**

Clare’s leaving narrative thus materialises a process of splitting as well as of transition, complicating the integration of past and present within her account. As such, as with the other narratives explored in this chapter, her narrative exhibits signs of ‘discomposure’ as she endeavours to reconstruct her experiences of leaving.\(^{155}\) In the leaving narrative of my final respondent in this chapter, such signs become altogether more pervasive, to a point where the narrative produced threatens to buckle.

The circumstances of Rosie’s childhood were in important respects different from those of any of the respondents considered thus far. Born in 1938 and leaving for London in 1954, Rosie grew up in a decaying tenement building in inner-city Cork, the third of six children in a ‘very, very poor family’.\(^{156}\) Such were the conditions of this existence that ‘we lost two babies, Patrick and Kathleen, through bad chests’ when Rosie was still very young. Nor did things improve with time. While her mother was pregnant with her youngest brother Pat, Rosie’s father, an ‘obnoxious, horrible man’, ‘went to England. Left us in other words’. Not only did this leave the family financially dependent upon a weekly 15 shillings benefit and whatever provision was available through local charities such as the St. Vincent de Paul, but it also conferred upon the family a ‘stigma…about your dad going to England, and a mother who was on her own.’\(^{157}\)

In addition, Rosie’s father’s abandonment of the family had a third important consequence:

The one thing I do remember is, you know we were so poor and hungry and that… I remember being happy. My mum was just such a lovely lady, and she was a lovely singer.


\(^{156}\) Rosie Long, p. 1.

\(^{157}\) Rosie Long, p. 2.
and she’s actually passed it on to us – I used to be a pretty good singer until I got my asthma but my daughter is a lovely singer now, and she’s also called Mary-Ann.\footnote{Rosie Long, p. 2.}

When Rosie’s father left, the oldest members of the family were called upon to support their mother in a variety of ways in order to ensure survival. For Rosie this took the form of domestic labour within the home alongside her mother, particularly following her older sister Anne’s detention in an industrial school for stealing when Rosie was six. One result of this close contact was the development of an especially tender affective bond between mother and daughter, reflected in Rosie’s narrative in a recurrent refracting of her own self through images of her mother, blurring the distinction between them. As in the above extract, in which a gift of voice is passed twice from mother to daughter, creating an unbroken line of self-sameness across generations, this intersubjective relation is frequently the source of cherished personal qualities, idealised in the mother and incorporated into the self.

At other moments, however, the demands associated with the auxiliary role the young Rosie has been assigned also appear as unconscious sources of frustration, even as the successful performance of this role affords her a powerful form of social recognition. Although Rosie repeatedly emphasises how much she enjoyed helping her mother, when her mother finds a job at the School for the Industrious Blind, shortly after her sister Anne has been sent to the Industrial School, her responsibilities at home increase, and signs of strain begin to creep into her depiction of her domestic role:

So she got a job there, cleaning, which meant I had to look after my brother Pat. I had to do all the work in the house, and… and I did it, I did it. I remember we had the old washboards and a bar of soap, and my knuckles used to be red raw from the scrubbing, you know. But I used to peg lines of washing out, and I remember one… one neighbour said, “Oh, God, I wish I had a daughter like you that would do some work like that for me!” like, you know. So, I didn’t mind doing that. I didn’t feel resentful at all. I just felt that, you know, I could do it!\footnote{Rosie Long, p. 5.}
Such images of self-abnegation, wherein Rosie professes to be content with her situation while obliquely signalling the opposite, recur throughout her narrative of adolescence, typically at points where Rosie juxtaposes the conditions of her own life with those of more fortunate others, and frequently involving reference to bleeding wounds which work to contradict the stated denial of unhappiness. Such images may be seen to materialise a subjectivity formed as the product of Rosie’s investment in a particular ideal of sacrificial femininity, which prescribes the denial of personal desire in the service of family as a goal of the self, in interaction with Rosie’s internal family structure as it conflicts with class position.

As noted, when Rosie’s father left, her mother became heavily reliant on her for various kinds of support, given the precarious economic situation of the family. This reliance fostered an affectionate bond between mother and daughter, engendering in Rosie a deep sense of loyalty to her mother, while the opportunity to play a vital domestic role enabled her to imagine herself in terms of ideal conceptions of the good daughter. Rosie’s investment in this ideal was in turn reinforced by the way her performance of this role was recognised by other figures and institutions symbolised by the approving gaze of the neighbour whose voice Rosie ventriloquises above.

However, while these processes fostered the deep introjection of an idealised image of femininity, the prescriptions of self-sacrifice embedded within this image encourage the splitting-off of desires for self-gratification. Class here plays a complex role. On the one hand, Rosie’s family’s impoverishment makes family members dependent upon religious figures and societies in a variety of ways, referred to constantly within her narrative, at the same time as it makes Rosie’s mother dependent on her. To the extent Rosie’s socialisation within a class culture heavily shaped by religious practice works to inculcate self-projects of self-abnegation as a means of managing the stresses of her situation, class reinforces the idea of duty to family and the denial of desire. On the other, impoverishment and class stigma engender a sense of otherness which Rosie increasingly seeks to transcend by other means. As she reaches adolescence, when Rosie compares the conditions and constraints of her own existence with those of her friends who stayed on at school and her sister Anne in London, she is less and less able to sublimate personal desire through projects of
transcendent self-abnegation.\textsuperscript{160} In this part of her narrative, Rosie tentatively seeks recognition for an alternative self, but her family’s precarious economic position and internal structure, together with the moral prescriptions of Catholic femininity, militate against the provision of such recognition. Unable to engage in an assertive act of rebellion against the law given the affective bond between mother and daughter, so the unrecognised desire is partially re-sublimated into images of dutiful selfhood which intimate deep unhappiness at the same time as they self-consciously perform the ideal of sacrificial femininity.

Rosie’s narrative of leaving may be read as a particularly fraught attempt to make this unspoken desire for escape and personal gratification cohere with these conflicting elements of her habitus. Set over two years, between the ages of 14 and 16, in the first take Rosie constructs an elaborate, fairy-tale-like narrative organised in three successive phases. In the first phase, presented as a period of improvement and harmony in the fortunes of Rosie’s family, Rosie recalls her joy at the return of her brother John-Joe from industrial school and the benefits this brought to the family income when he got a job as a messenger boy. As Rosie put it, ‘we were all getting on our feet’: ‘We were a happy group!’\textsuperscript{161} This period of stability and harmony was not to last, however. The second phase of Rosie’s leaving narrative concerns the return of her father, who has come into money in England, and the implications his re-instatement within the family home has for the continuity of the ‘happy group’. Having only moments ago constructed the return of her brother in idealised terms, Rosie now switches to venting emotions of hate as she recalls her first sighting of her returned father:

\begin{quote}
I was coming up hill pushing my bike, and I could see my mum up at the top of the hill, and, I knew… I kinda knew him on sight, and I hated him on sight. I hated him! Still do.\textsuperscript{162}
\end{quote}

Despite his new-found wealth, Rosie opposed her father’s efforts to ingratiate himself with the family: ‘We didn’t need him, we were all getting on our feet’.\textsuperscript{163} Whether he was needed

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\textsuperscript{160} Rosie Long, pp. 6-7, 9.  
\textsuperscript{161} Rosie Long, p. 8.  
\textsuperscript{162} Rosie Long, p. 9.  
\textsuperscript{163} Rosie Long, p. 10.  
\end{flushright}
or not, however, Rosie’s father stayed. And although Rosie, thanks to a live-in job at a local hospital, was largely autonomous of him, his self re-instatement within the family home altered familial dynamics in important ways. Firstly, Rosie saw less and less of her mother. In part, this was because, as Rosie states, ‘I didn’t want to go home. I didn’t want to go home, I … the only reason I went home was to see my mum’. At the same time, however, her father restricted her mother’s mobility:

She didn’t kind of go out a lot, ‘cos you see, when he wasn’t there, we could please ourselves like, if we wanted to go to the pictures, and if we could have afforded it…But she didn’t seem to be doing that now he was home. Things like should have been getting better for her, with him having a few bob. But… leopards don’t change their spots.

Rosie’s father’s ‘spots’ were fully exposed when, having come home drunk one night, he beat her younger brother Pat ‘black and blue’ with a belt buckle. Such were the degree of his injuries that ‘the police had to be involved’, resulting in Pat being ‘put away for his own safety, into the industrial school’. While this event confirms Rosie’s assessment of her father within the narrative, justifying her autonomous stance and avoidance of the family home, it also meant that, as Rosie states, ‘my brother couldn’t go home at his confirmation, ‘cos my father was there’. Thus, Rosie, together with her older brother and sister, take Pat out for the day after his confirmation. Then, having described the details of the day out, Rosie reveals that she has quit her job at the hospital, an event she seems to suggest was immediately temporally antecedent to her leaving for England:

We got to Blarney, had a fantastic day, and took my brother back into the school before evening. And... because they woul... because they didn’t want to let me out for my brother’s confirmation, in the Home, I says, “Well I’m very sorry,” I said, “I’m going to my brother’s confirmation.” And I said, “If I can’t have the day off, I’ll have to leave!” So I left. That was major! Wherever it came from I don’t know, but that was major!

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164 Rosie Long, p. 10.
165 Rosie Long, p. 10.
166 Rosie Long, p. 10.
167 Rosie Long, p. 11.
168 Rosie Long, p. 12.
Because it was so ‘important’ for Rosie ‘to be there’ for her brother given ‘the other fuckin’ bastard wouldn’t have been there’, she is forced to leave her job: family is prioritised over self-interest, justifying the decision to leave (her job).

This leaves the way open for the action of the third phase, initiated by the phrase ‘so then’, in which Rosie’s sister Anne returns from London. After mesmerising Rosie with stories about ‘all these dancehalls, and glamour’, she asks her to come over: ‘why don’t you come over?’. Since Rosie had ‘already been working two years’, she had her national insurance number, and with no other reason to decline apparent, Rosie, in a deeply resonant phrase, ‘succumbed to temptation’.  

On closer inspection, revealing inconsistencies are apparent in Rosie’s presentation of this third phase. The phrase ‘so then’ seems to imply that Anne’s return coincides with Rosie leaving her job, which in turn coincides with Rosie going to England: these three events are run together, giving an impression of linear temporal coincidence. However, as Rosie realises, in order to receive a national insurance number she needed to have been 16, and she was only 14 when she quit her job at the hospital. Thus, when Rosie reveals that she’d ‘already been working two years’, it becomes apparent that two years, in which Rosie had been working, have elapsed between her quitting her job at the hospital and leaving for England, thereby undermining any suggestion of a causal link between the two events. This in turn prompts questions about the role of Rosie’s sister in her narrative of leaving. Initially, Rosie seems to suggest her sister’s question ‘why don’t you come over?’ was asked at the time when she had lost her job, when she was fourteen, given the word ‘until’ in the sentence immediately subsequent: ‘well I couldn’t go over ‘till I was sixteen’. However, the sentence immediately following seems to bring Rosie into contradiction: ‘and I’d already been working two years’. Rosie could not have been fourteen and have already worked two years when her sister asks the question which ‘tempted’ her into going to England.

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169 Rosie Long, p. 11.
What do these inconsistencies signify? And why does Rosie’s narrative of leaving compress time in such a way that two years are effectively excluded from her story? Partial answers to these questions begin to emerge some ten minutes later when Rosie reveals that during the two years in question she has been working in the Institute for the Industrious Blind, her mother, who also worked there, having found her a position that afforded her accommodation in addition to a ‘fantastic’ thirty shilling a week wage. Thus, not only was a lack of employment not a factor in Rosie’s emigration, but she was also able, despite her father’s return, to see her mother on a daily basis. Rosie then tells a very different story regarding events immediately preceding leaving for England:

… the night I was leaving they were all giving me cards, I eve got references from the matron of the Bl… Blind Asylum, they used to call it. Way with words, you know, they used to call the mental hospital ‘the mad house’. They have a way with words in Cork. And [coughs] I remember cycling home on my bike and there was a part in Cork city by the bus station, still the same place, and when the tide comes in, the water’s almost level… with the thing… and it almost crossed my mind to cycle straight into the River Lee. I felt that bad about things. ‘Cos, things had really started to get normal for me, and I began to feel, I never, ever wanted to leave home, erm, and things could have only got better, you know. I really was tempted to just carrying on cycling in, straight into the River Lee. Didn’t. Came home. I had to leave my bike there obviously, ‘cos I, ‘cos the lady came and took it back, ‘cos I was paying for it by the week anyway. And, erm… so ‘twas the next day then that I set off.¹⁷⁰

One possible reason why Rosie by-passes two years in her initial narrative of leaving is that this period in her life is associated with deep emotional conflict, leading her on the night before her departure to London to contemplate suicide. This event, like the fact that Rosie had a good job working near her mother prior to leaving, needs to be erased from Rosie’s preferred account of leaving because it makes visible an unacknowledged personal desire to pursue an independent life in England, the same desire present in sublimated form in earlier images of self-abnegation. Rosie ‘felt so bad about things’, not because she was being driven against her will to leave her home, but because she felt torn between a sense of love, duty and loyalty to her mother on the one hand, and a desire to ‘succumb’ to the ‘temptations’ of ‘dancehalls and glamour’ on the other.

In fact, Rosie’s leaving narrative as a whole may be read as an elaborate attempt to negotiate the deep fear that underlies this conflict, namely that leaving for England will destroy the bond between mother and daughter, and through it the very existence of the self. Unable to tolerate the extreme anxiety generated by this fear, Rosie engages in a form of defensive splitting whereby this anxiety is projected onto the demonised figure of her returned father in an attempt to construct an oedipal scenario. This means that her father becomes a dangerous, persecutory figure within her interior landscape, but it also means that the self can be protected from its own guilty desires as her father now becomes responsible for the severing of the mother-daughter tie and the fragmentation of the family: Rosie’s father chains her mother to the interior of the home so that mother and daughter can no longer see each other, and his violent beating of Pat sets in play the chain of events which results in Rosie losing her job, setting the scene for her unpremeditated departure. In this way, Rosie is able to achieve a fragile composure through splitting-off the negative imago of the selfish daughter who abandons her mother and destroys her family, leaving the cherished imago of the ‘good daughter’ intact.

In the third phase of the narrative, the part concerned with the act of leaving itself, this composure begins to unravel. What should have been, formally speaking, a moment of escape or even redemption is ultimately figured in terms of sin: ‘I…succumbed to temptation, and I went’. As noted above, the ideal of sacrificial femininity valorised within religious discourse embedded proscriptions against the gratification of personal desire, particularly where such desires threatened to disrupt the proper functioning of the family. Religious discourses on female emigration during the period tended to reproduce such proscriptions within representations that associated the practice with sinfulness and transgression. In one version of this discourse, priests and other public figures expressed fears about the morally corruptive effects of ‘sinful’ British cities upon naïve and vulnerable young ‘Irish girls’. In cautionary renderings of this narrative, young girls are lured away from the safe, virtuous space of the family home to the metropolis by ‘the glamour and the bright lights, the endless train and diversity of amusements, many of them unwholesome’.171

In a different version, female emigration poses a threat to the Irish nation’s reproductive capacities, and the young female emigrant’s wilfulness is equated with an unconcern for

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‘traditional’ responsibilities. Writing in 1954, the year Rosie left, the editor of *The Vanishing Irish*, John O’Brien, found ‘disturbing’:

…the fact that most of the emigrants in the last five years are women and girls: potential mothers of families lost forever to Ireland. Hence we can see that for more than a century emigration has been like a huge open sore on the bosom of Ireland, robbing her of her lifeblood.

For Father Patrick Noonan, writing in the same volume, culpability for Mother Ireland’s blood loss was associated with young women’s rejection of ‘traditional’ ways:

The past decade has indeed witnessed a striking change in Irish girlhood. The combined influences of emigration, the tourist influx, the craze for pleasure, and all the modern trends in thought and conduct have well-nigh transformed the traditional colleen into a sophisticated miss. A rural existence no longer appeals to her. The obvious consequence is fewer marriages and a further subordination of rural life.

In Rosie’s case, such constructs reinforce a personal understanding of her own act of leaving as sin, as abandonment and betrayal, inducing powerful feelings of guilt which Rosie endeavours to resolve within her narrative. This guilt underlies her attempt to deny her own agency in leaving, but it also underpins the confessional mode of narration she takes-up in the interview, impelling her to reveal the personal torment she experienced the night before departure, creating in the process a vast rent in the version of events narrated. The initial strategy of narrative composure all but abandoned now, Rosie’s narrative now loses its unifying coherence as, prompted to recall the day of leaving, she attempts to make sense of the moment of transgression:

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172 A 1947 resolution by the Hierarchy, intended for private transmission to An Taoiseach, read: ‘The Bishops view with great alarm the continuous drain on the womanhood and future motherhood of the country as a result of the present wave of emigration, and they consider it contrary to the spiritual and temporal welfare of the nation that foreign agents should be allowed to enter the country to attract girls abroad with promises of lucrative employment, the fulfilment of which no one in this country could control’. NAD, S15,398/A. Quoted in O’ Grada, *A Rocky Road*, p. 212.


Barry: Do you remember that day, the day you left?

Rosie: I'll never forget it. Never forget it. [quietly crying] I managed to buy this lovely new bike. And I'd started try... I was getting kind of a, a normal type of life. I was pal-ing round with a friend of mine, who used to live near me in Cork, too. And we used to go off on our bikes, and I felt normal for the first time in years, with the bike, friends, and going places. [Sobs] In spite of all that I thought, “No, I’ll... I’ll go with our Anne,” you know, thought, “Oh! They love Irish people in England! Oh! And they even eat potatoes in tins!” and all these... stories I was hearing. And they bury them under the ground! Must have been war stuff. So I went over, and again, my mum couldn’t come out... come to the boat to see me off, because of him. So, Jesus knows what I’d put in the suitcase, but whatever I had was shoved in this little suitcase. And it was my Auntie Nellie who used to live across the road from us, my father’s sister, who while we were all young, pretended not to know us. I ne... I never, ever forgave her for that. But she’d... came down to see me off at the boat, and I remember her, ’twas one fifty to go on the Innisfallen, single fare. Erm... she gave me two bars of Cadbury’s chocolate. Big ones. “Jesus!” I thought, you know, delighted like. And I got this old handbag, I’d never had a handbag, and I... you had to go up this plank on the Innisfallen, and like Marie was saying, they were singing all these songs: “Now is the hour we must say goodbye.” And, erm... my heart was absolutely broke. And erm, anyway, the next, next thing I’d seen was my mam on the quay. On her own. She’d, she’d come down... He must have gone to the pub, or whatever. So I remember waving goodbye to my mum [sobs]... I didn’t want to leave her! I didn’t want to leave home. And I could just see, she was only small, she had a shawl on her, and she was saying, “Wave to me!” So I, I had these two bars of chocolate, and the boat set off, and sobbed like.175

As she recalls the day of leaving, Rosie is caught up in a blizzard of conflicting emotions and impulses, veering from one pole of understanding to another in a narrative of warring desires, where opposing parts of the self can no longer be kept apart. Rosie begins by recalling, as in the previous extract, the ways in which things were becoming ‘normal’, once again invoking the image of her ‘lovely new bike’. However, ‘in spite of all that’, Rosie opts to go to England, enticed by ‘all these stories I was hearing’. This vacillatory interplay between uncertainty and excitement is well captured in the image of Rosie boarding the ship with her first handbag, walking the plank to the words ‘now is the hour we must say goodbye’. The image as a whole depicts Rosie crossing a threshold of femininity, boarding the ship with a new handbag that symbolises the modern, sophisticated femininity she aspires to and associates with England. This new femininity, however, is embodied with uncertainty. In hearing the words of the song, which reinterpret the scene in terms of loss rather than new beginnings, Rosie’s ‘heart was absolutely broke’. Her sister absent from the scene, it is at this point that Rosie poignantly recalls the diminutive, solitary figure of her mother waving on the quayside. The scene now becomes a metaphor for the irresolvable

175 Rosie Long, p. 12.
emotional conflict leaving represents for her. At the scene of the new departure, the moment of self-realisation, the past does not recede into the background; the figure of the mother returns, a searing symbol of guilt, love and loss. Rosie denies once more the desire to leave. The boat sets sail. The self is torn.

**Difference and disparity**

What is found at the beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissection of other things. It is disparity. 176

Linear histories of migration journeys often begin in the place left behind. In such narratives the ‘homeland’ constitutes a point of origin, the anchor of a shared lineage and descent, defining the true essence of the migrant, and a discrete narrative moment explaining the decision to leave and upon which the meaning of subsequent events may be predicated. Representations of this moment in interpretations of post-war Irish emigration to England often deploy an aesthetics of exile to highlight the shared despair and injustice suffered by this generation of migrants. Tim Pat Coogan begins his monumental history of the Irish Diaspora with a recollection of ‘the shabby, set-faced hoard’ he regularly observed making their way to ‘the mailboat’ in Dun Laoghaire when he was a boy:

Like nearly every other Irish person of my generation, some of my closest relatives were forced into unwilling emigration. I have always lived near Dun Laoghaire where ‘the mailboat’ left for Holyhead, in Wales, and the sight of the shabby, set-faced hoard pouring down Marine Road and on to those uncomfortable, vomit-producing ferries for dead-end jobs, punctuated by pub and prejudice, was one of the haunting memories of childhood. Nobody talked about those people, nobody did anything for them. Theirs was a fate that did not speak its name…177

This chapter complicates this view of the emigrant experience in a number of ways. Firstly, while emigration was unquestionably a controversial theme within Irish political discourse, it is difficult to sustain Coogan’s idea of a collective silence on emigration. Rather, the period was one in which the official vision of Irish modernity institutionalised after

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independence was being reworked. Discourses on emigration were imbricated in this process such that the body of the emigrant became a site on which competing versions of national selfhood were inscribed. As a result, distinct imaginings of the ‘causes’ of emigration and the motivations and identity of the emigrant were readily apparent across a range of discourses.

Secondly, while the people who left Ireland during this period were broadly speaking ‘economic migrants’ (they left to find work because the country of their birth could not in many instances satisfy this need), this fact is not the only one relevant to understanding migrant’s motivations for and experience of leaving. What the analysis undertaken here suggests is that a complex interplay of factors, including competing discursive forms, familial dynamics, class position, date of birth and departure, place of childhood and adolescence, conditioned emigrants’ horizons of subjectivity formation. How individuals made sense of the particular circumstances confronting them, however, was highly specific and related to how the accretion of prior experience engendered particular desires and self-understandings in relation to the issue of leaving. The experience of emigration and the formation of emigrant identity thus cannot be explained solely by reference to ‘economic necessity’, but must be examined in terms of how different configurations of this interplay shape individuals’ subjectivities in distinct ways.

This in turn gives rise to a third observation, namely that an exclusive emphasis on feelings of victimisation and alienation, ascribed to all migrants through phrases such as ‘forced into unwilling emigration’ and ‘shabby, set-faced horde’, underplays the complexity and range of emotions evoked in migrant’s memories of leaving. While emotions such as sadness, alienation and loss were clearly present in migrant’s narratives, so too were emotions of guilt, frustration, jealousy, determination, empowerment, ambition and excitement. More than this, multiple desires, anxieties and emotions could be present simultaneously: a narrative of leaving might express a desire for greater wealth, status and excitement at the same moment it intimates feelings of guilt and loss. The subjectivities constituted through narratives of leaving were thus split in complex ways, and respondents engaged, in distinct ways and with varying degrees of success, in strategies of self-composure by which they sought to manage this tendency towards fragmentation. Leaving was thus both a point of
discontinuity and attempted re/synthesis in these five life narratives, the meaning of which was never unified or stable but multi-layered and frequently contradictory.

Brought into relation with one another, these three observations point to an understanding of emigrant experience that foregrounds difference and disparity at the point of origin. The five narratives examined here are in one sense representative of a shared subjectivity, defining a particular horizon of possibilities for emigrant self-construction, but attention to the specificity of subject’s interactions with their different environments also makes visible multiple, shifting lines of difference, between and within subjects. If the ‘homeland’, the place ‘left behind’, constitutes a key point of origin for the migrant self, the analysis undertaken in this chapter suggests that for Irish migrants to post-war England this origin was marked by difference and disparity. In turn, instead of seeking to substantiate the form of a shared ethnicity in England, the following chapters trace some of these lines of originary disparity into the context of settlement, exploring how they intersect and interact with new constructions of difference as subjects negotiate particular spaces within their new environment.
Chapter Two
Lives in re/Construction: Irish men’s memories of work in the British construction industry

The derided but mobile Paddy

Given the dire state of Britain’s finances at the end of the Second World War, raising national productivity levels would constitute a basic premise of post-war economic recovery for the newly elected Labour government. As the fuel crisis of 1947 would demonstrate, however, acute labour shortages seriously threatened the realisation of this goal. As the Economic Survey for 1947 made clear, a central problem for economic planners in the post-war period concerned how ‘to expand the nation’s labour force, to increase its output per man-year and, above all, to get men and women where they are needed most’.\footnote{Parliamentary Papers, Economic Survey for 1947, Cmd 7046 (London, HMSO, 1947).}

Immigration, facilitated by labour recruitment schemes and the flexible understanding of citizenship enshrined by the 1948 British Nationality Act, represented one means by which state and industry sought to manage the problem of labour supply. Favoured above all others in this respect were Irish migrants, who, despite Eire’s complete withdrawal from the commonwealth in 1949, were granted the same rights as British citizens under the 1948 Act, enabling the entry of between 50,000 and 60,000 a year into the British labour market between 1946 and 1961.\footnote{Kathleen Paul, ‘A Case of Mistaken Identity: The Irish in Postwar Britain’, International Labour and Working-Class History 49 (1996), pp. 116-142.}

As a number of scholars have pointed out, Britain’s post-war labour crisis may be seen to mark an important shift in the work history of the Irish in Britain.\footnote{See, for example, Patrick Fitzgerald, and B. Lambkin, Migration in Irish History, 1607–2007 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 244-46.} Beginning with Irish labour recruitment into new industries during wartime, the contemporary sociologist JA Jackson identified a process whereby the changing labour needs of the British economy opened ‘the way for far greater occupational choice and mobility for the Irish immigrant to
Britain and paved the way for direct Irish infiltration into almost every branch of industry in the period since the end of the war. Yet if post-war labour demands fostered a greater diffusion of Irish labour within the British economy, popular representations of the Irish migrant during the period continued to associate him with heavy, ‘unskilled’ labour, in particular with the construction industry. As before the war, ‘Paddy’ the labourer was frequently visible as a rough, roguish figure within the national press and, later, in popular television series, and in reworked form, as a peculiar form of ‘delinquent’ within the observations of social scientists.

Such representations reflected the resilience of pre-war stereotypes, but they also pointed to continuities in the work profile of the Irish migrant in the post-war period. If such migrants were in high demand, they were needed most in Britain’s ‘undermanned’ industries, for the performance of ‘dirty jobs’ the state could not persuade the native population to undertake, given increased upward occupational mobility amongst the British working class. Despite relative occupational diffusion, the majority of Irish migrants arrived in Britain lacking the forms of capital necessary for entry into the more lucrative and prestigious fields of employment within the labour market, and so continued to gravitate towards arduous, low-status and frequently hazardous forms of work in domestic or ‘personal’ service, metal manufacturing, agriculture and construction. Concerning the last of these, and according to the 1951 census, almost 18% of the total Irish-born male population resident in England and Wales worked in ‘building’, with an additional 13.8% classified as ‘unskilled’. In Scotland this rose to almost 25% and 14.3% respectively.

Viewed thus, the Irish in post-war Britain constituted a flow of commodified labour, a ‘replacement population’ whose function was to inhabit those segments of the technical division of labour hastily evacuated by Britons. Such was the view of Donal Foley, whose own migration from Kilkenny to London in 1944 would ultimately lead to a career in journalism, first on Fleet Street and later with The Irish Times:

182 Images of the Irish as hard-drinking and prone to fighting were ubiquitous in British TV series such as Only Fools and Horses and Fawlty Towers. See in particular Fawlty Towers, ‘The Builders’ (BBC 1, September 26, 1975).
183 Figures taken from tabulations in Jackson, The Irish in Britain, pp. 198-199.
The Irish in Britain were always hewers of wood and drawers of water, and so they have remained to this day…This was much in evidence during the war and post-war years in Britain, when it was the derided but mobile Paddy who willingly did all the dirty jobs for clean money…Often they had no tax cards, no insurance stamps. In fact, there were no records at all of many of them. They were hard working, well paid slaves, exactly what Britain wanted to rebuild their devastated country.\(^{184}\)

In highlighting these continuities in the work experiences of Irish migrants in twentieth century Britain, such views constitute a crucial corrective to liberal narratives of the post-war period, which have tended to present change in terms of a progressive movement towards social levelling and to position Irish migrants unproblematically within the newly ‘affluent’ working class.\(^{185}\) The clustering of some Irish migrants within particular segments of the labour market, not to mention their relation to the country left behind and their ambivalent positionings within British popular culture, meant that Irish migrant experiences within post-war Britain negotiated distinct horizons of possibility. That said, a limitation of the emphasis on the commodification and cultural outsidership of Irish labour in post-war Britain is that the workplace is grasped only as a site of alienation. What studies of the role of work in the shaping of masculinities have repeatedly stressed, however, is the importance of men’s interactions with the work process and participation in work-based cultures in shaping masculine identity, highlighting how different forms of work are implicated in the construction of distinct forms of masculinity.\(^{186}\) As Collinson and Hearn observe:

For many men, employment provides the interrelated economic resources and symbolic benefits of wages/salaries, skills and experience, career progress and positions of power, authority and high discretion. Typically, it seems, men’s gender identities are constructed,


compared and evaluated by self and others according to a whole variety of criteria indicating personal ‘success’ in the workplace.¹⁸⁷

Using the personal work histories of three male migrants who spent the majority of their working lives in construction, this chapter investigates the industry as a site for the construction of migrant identities, exploring this process in terms of three inter-related dynamics. Setting the analysis within the broader contexts of the post-war British economy and culture, the first project of the chapter is to examine the specificity of respondents’ experiences within the post-war construction industry, exploring how their performance of distinct roles, different occupational trajectories, and changing conditions within the industry shaped different kinds of gendered identification with construction within their work histories. Alongside and intersecting with this, the chapter also explores the different ways in which the experiences of Irish men in the British construction industry have been represented by a variety of actors in the second half of the twentieth century, such that a set of common tropes, images and formulas have become available at the level of the communal/public for popular consumption. The chapter examines the different ways these images are implicated in the dialectic by which respondents endeavour to make their experiences within the industry and the identifications engendered through them cohere with the psychological needs of the self situated in the present.

Finally, the chapter seeks to explore the diverse ways issues of belonging play into these processes of construction. As Liam Harte has put it:

‘the “ex-isled” self is forever prone to reading “here” in relation to “there”. It is a truism that migration, whether coerced or freely chosen, typically entails the loss of a familiar, sustaining community and demands a fresh orientation towards a new and often discomfiting world of chance and change. Yet the past is never entirely left behind, even by those who devoutly desire it, any more than the present is seamlessly embraced, once and for all.’ ¹⁸⁸

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Within the historiography on the Irish in nineteenth century Britain questions of belonging have typically been dealt with in terms of the dichotomous categories integration/segregation and assimilation/alienation. As Harte’s point suggests, however, migrant belongings are much more ambivalent, contingent and pluralized than such frameworks permit. To invoke Kerby Miller’s version of the above dichotomies, migrants rarely fit neatly into ‘the emigrant (determined to stay) type’ or ‘the exile (yearning to return) type’ categories, but often sustain in variable and graduated ways both forms of attachment, modulating between one and the other at different times, in different spaces, for different reasons. Indeed, as Fitzgerald and Lambkin point out:

For most migrants it was never a simple choice between old world and new world because they effectively belonged to ‘three different worlds’: that of the immigrants, that of the receiving country and that of the old country. This means that outcomes of migration at the level of individual migrants are highly diverse, varying over time according to changing circumstances and attitudes in all ‘three worlds’. 189

For Irish migrants in the post-war construction industry, the industry was never only an arena for the construction of masculine identities, or even class identities, but a space in which masculinity, class position and diasporic belongings intersected in diverse ways. This chapter explores this intersectionality through the distinct forms of dialogue that take place between ‘here’ and ‘there’ within subjects’ accounts of work within the industry.

‘The first chance I got I went outside’

Denis, whom we met in the last chapter, was born in 1927 and grew up near Listowel, Kerry, on his family’s 25 acre farm. After leaving school in 1941, aged 14, Denis began work on a local council-managed bog, where he drove a horse and cart transporting turf. Although Denis liked this job, by 1947 work on Lyrecrumpane bog where he was employed had become increasingly irregular. As such, given the lack of alternative forms of employment in the immediate vicinity and the fact that he was not in line to inherit the family farm, Denis migrated to London in September 1948 in order to keep ‘working and

making a living’. Arriving in England during a period of acute labour shortages, Denis did not have to wait long to achieve his aim. Having got ‘a set of cards’, Denis found work almost immediately in a foundry in Ealing, moulding doors for electric trains.

Despite Denis’s rapid success in finding work, his memories of this period in his work history contrast with the nostalgicized account he offered earlier of working on the bog back in Ireland. As we saw in the previous chapter, Denis ‘loved working everyday’ on ‘the bog’, equating this time in his life with ‘freedom’ and ‘craic’:

I enjoyed the work with the freedom and the… the craic and everything like that was great growing up. [Pauses]. That’s what I enjoyed. Very little money, but we had a great time.

In contrast, Denis’s recollection of the period immediately following arrival in England presents work in terms of compulsion:

Barry: And that would have been ju… a few years after the War then? Erm…
Denis: Well it was. Well, the War was finished in 1945. And then that was 1948. So that was all the immigration, you see. Mm hm.
Barry: That’s right, aye.
Denis: The American and… and [pauses] they come over here and they… you had to… you had to work, because there was no other way to get a living.
Barry: So what was your first job, whenever you arrived?
Denis: My first job was working in a foundry, in Ealing.
Barry: Right.
Denis: In London.
Barry: What did you think of that sort of work?
Denis: Oh I… ‘twas the wintertime, when you come on the winter it changed, it changed with the winter. And it was, er, it was very dusty, which was… No, I enjoyed it. Really. But I wanted to go outside and the first chance I got I went outside then. Working on the [pauses] roads and sewers and all that craic.

As noted above, a necessary condition of British economic recovery in the immediate post-war period was a significant increase in output levels in staple industries. The popular rhetoric of post-war ‘austerity’ did not only call upon citizens to conserve scarce resources,
but emphasised too the importance of their role as producers in ‘winning the peace’. In a broadcast to the nation during the convertibility crisis of July 1947, Atlee made this clear: ‘we shall need longer hours of work from some, change of jobs for many, harder work of all’. However, while conditions of full employment were maintained during the period and productivity levels had undergone significant increases by 1949, state and industry continued to have problems directing labour into ‘essential industries’, necessitating the use of migrant labour from abroad. Irish migrants, their entry to the British labour market predicated on the expectation that they would make up the ‘manpower’ deficit in such industries, thus became key targets of post-war producerist discourse, even as popular perceptions of Irish workers continued to be affected by Ireland’s neutrality stance during the war and the past-ruptures of Anglo-Irish relations more generally. This was reflected in the lengths to which the Ministry of Labour went in order to ensure the safe arrival of assisted migrants to Britain, providing food, travel and shelter, and more generally, in the continuation of wartime landing controls, to which all male migrants were subject. Through this latter mechanism, via which male migrants acquired their working papers, the government was able to direct ‘suitable migrants’ – ‘fit men between 18 and 35’ – into approved employment, typically the ‘undermanned’ ‘essential industries’. As Denis, shifting to the second person voice, thus put it: ‘you had to work’.

Yet, if Denis’s memories are here related through a language of compulsion, intimating that this early phase of his work history was a difficult one, a sense of agency returns to his narrative when he recalls his ambition ‘to go outside’. On arrival in England, Denis was directed into metal manufacturing, a chronically ‘undermanned’ industry during the early post-war period. The construction industry too, however, had persistent problems satisfying its labour needs during the same period. Given the aggregate effects of pre-war shortages, wartime blitzing and a post-war spurt in marriage and fertility rates, a key social policy aim for post-war governments was to dramatically increase Britain’s depleted housing stock and to develop major transport links. Demand, however, would consistently outstrip supply in

194 Clement Atlee, quoted in *The Times*, August 11, 1947.
195 Richard Weight notes, for example, that when Eamon de Valera toured Britain in 1958 he was regularly booed, and in London on St. Patrick’s Day an angry crowd threw bottles, leading to the arrest of forty people. R. Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain 1940-2000* (Macmillan, London, 2002), p. 147.
197 HO313/1330, Basis on Which Irish Labour Control is to be Continued after 31 March 1947, from Paul, ‘A Case of Mistaken Identity’, p. 119.
terms of both houses built and the labour force, which stood at a third of its pre-war level in the immediate post-war years.\textsuperscript{198} Thus, although the industry would undergo sustained expansion throughout the 1940s and 50s, it did so under tight labour market conditions such that the industry could provide for regular employment at relatively good rates of remuneration up until the 1960s, whether one was working on public housing schemes or ‘the roads and sewers’.\textsuperscript{199}

The ‘first chance’ he got after arriving in England, Denis took up work in the industry as a ground worker or labourer. Although Denis insists that he ‘enjoyed’ working in the foundry, his account of his decision to change employment contrasts the ‘dusty’, confined environment of this workplace with the desire, articulated through the first person voice, ‘to go outside’, establishing overlapping evaluative oppositions between outdoors/indoors and clean/dirty. Approached through Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, this preference may be seen as a function of the ways in which Denis’s earlier work experiences on the farm and bog have engendered a particular ‘sense of one’s place’. In a rural context where popular discourses on Irish masculinity linked authenticity with contact with the land, Denis has interiorised particular features of his youthful work experiences as constitutive of the boundaries of the self, leading him in England to equate such features with ‘freedom’ and disposing him to seek out work contexts where these images of self can be re-embodied. Bog work and farm work are not of course identical with ‘working on the roads and sewers’, but all take place in the open air and involve similar sorts of bodily competencies, in particular shovel work. One way of reading Denis’s desire ‘to go outside’ is thus to see it as shaped by the way habitus disposes one to familiar spaces and forms of practice.

This ‘sense of one’s place’ was not only related to material features of the form of the workplace, however:

But that was only for a while, because then we moved out to… out to the country, and I was in digs down in Felixstowe in Suffolk. Worked there for a bit and then we went to pulling beet down in Nottingham in the wintertime. And we came back again to Suffolk again, then

\textsuperscript{198} J. R. Short, \textit{Housing in Britain: The Postwar Experience} (Methuen, London, 1982), pp. 42-44.
took the same job, you know. And I went from that job to London with them. Then… and I was with them until I left, came down here. They were Kerry. They were the same county as myself and my mate was… my mate and myself that I… we worked as partners after, and working… we… that’s how we done it, you know.200

Although the post-war construction industry would see growing numbers of ‘company men’ who contracted to work for one of the large building firms for the duration of their working lives, for many Irish migrants during this period and before the war employment in construction took a more casual form, where workers moved from job to job when one contract finished or there was preferable employment elsewhere.201 This casualism fostered a particular rhythm of itinerancy, characterised by on-going movement and travel between jobs in different parts of the country, phases of being in between jobs, where other forms of ‘unskilled’ labour were performed as a stop-gap, and the repeated taking up of new residences, either in makeshift on-site accommodation or private local lodging houses.

As migrant diaries, memoirs and fictionalised accounts of the period suggest, this transient lifestyle frequently marked such workers as outsiders among local populations and imposed myriad disruptions and discomforts upon everyday experience.202 As such sources also show, however, this itinerancy structured the practices of a distinctive milieu, based around the construction site, the temporary lodging house and particular local pubs, in which Irish men worked, lived and socialised with other men from similar backgrounds in rural Ireland. The networks formed through these interconnections performed important practical functions in terms of disseminating crucial information about jobs, wages and lodgings, much of which was unavailable at the labour exchange office. At the same time, however, they delineated the contours, however fluid, of a social space in Britain that could enable the

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recovery of ‘a sense of one’s place’ in a broader context of disruption and discontinuity, and in many instances, native hostility; where habituated ways of relating to oneself and others could be re-affirmed through interaction with others possessing similar emotional needs and ways of conceptualising the world. Whereas there were only ‘three or four’ Irish men employed in the foundry at Ealing, the causal labour culture of the construction industry offered Denis the opportunity to interact with other Irish men, indeed, to form a work gang with men from his home county, one of whom would become his life-long ‘mate’ and work ‘partner’.

‘the pickaxe, the shovel and the graft’

On this reading, then, the construction industry appears as a kind of refuge, where ties of ethnic belonging could be re-established. It remains a brute fact, however, that work within the industry was particularly arduous and dangerous during this period. As noted above, house-building, and reconstruction more generally, was an urgent policy issue for both the Labour and Conservative parties in the decades after the war, and the scale of demand in this area sustained expansion in construction up to the late 1960s and beyond. However, while this demand would help keep wages relatively high, it also contributed to an intensification of the labour process and rising fatalities.

In part, this had to do with the relative lack of mechanisation within the industry. Because much of the industry was heavily dependent on credit over the period, so it was highly sensitive to demand regulation at the macroeconomic level, with the result that the stop-go fluctuations of the wider economy were particularly pronounced within construction. In turn, although the industry continued to expand up until the late 1960s, outside of the largest companies this was not accompanied by increased mechanisation, since firms were reluctant to invest in new machinery that would lie idle during the next trough in demand. Instead, when the next ‘go’ phase was initiated firms responded by re-hiring labour, which was worked intensively in order to capitalise on the rising wave of demand.204

203 Denis Heaney, p. 13.
204 On the fluctuating character of work in the industry and its relation to government policy see J. R. Short, Housing in Britain: The Post-war Experience (Methuen, London, 1982), pp. 91-94.
At the same time, such fluctuations also contributed to the spread of payment-by-results methods of remuneration. Although pay and incentive schemes were in fact first introduced in 1947 under the Labour government, it was the returned Conservative party’s active monetary policies and de-regulation of the construction industry in the mid 1950s which stimulated the growth of private contractors and labour-only subcontractors within the industry. Aiming to maximise profits while demand was high and money cheap, many such firms negotiated piece rates directly with ‘self-employed’ labourers, who would compete against one another within casual labour pools for ‘a start’. However, although piece-work might enable some labourers to achieve relatively good wages, the remuneration/effort ratio was in fact increasingly tilted in favour of the contractors. Increases in productivity within the industry from the 1950s were not achieved through the hiring of greater numbers of labour or rapid increases in mechanisation, but via an intensification of the labour process, as fewer labourers were employed to do a greater quantity of work in a shorter space of time. During the 1958-69 period in particular, the industry underwent a boom, with the average rate of houses built rising from 249,000 to 340,000 per annum, at a time when unemployment was on the increase. 205 Inevitably, as foremen incited labourers to exceed what was physically manageable in order to capitalise on conditions of high demand, fatalities rose, and employment within the industry gained a reputation as hazardous. Thus, for construction unions, whose strength had been severely weakened by the spread of ‘The Lump’, industry safety, together with de-casualisation and nationally agreed rates of pay, became key issues in this period.206

In the diaries, memoirs and fictionalised accounts of Irish men who worked in post-war construction, the intensity of work processes within the industry forms a recurrent motif, around which a range of meanings are generated. For John O’Donoghue, for example, who was recruited to work as a labourer on an aerodrome site during wartime, the strenuousness of the work tasks he was obliged to perform pushed his forty year old body to its limits, so that the building site was recalled as site of pain and suffering:

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I poured shovel after shovel into the vessel again, each shovel putting a dreadful soreness all over my limbs. It was a relief when the hopper was raised and I got a few minutes’ rest. But down it came again and it had to be filled in a wild hurry each time. I was ready to drop, but I had to go on. I was by no means lazy, but quite willing to work, only that I had so little strength left in me for it.  

For other men who worked in the industry during the post-war period, however, the meanings attached to the work process were much less straightforward. Donall MacAmhlaigh came to England initially to work as an orderly in a hospital, but left after two weeks to work as a general labourer on a building site in Towcester. Transported by the contractor to the site ‘on spec’, soon after arrival he ‘got the job’, and was immediately set to work picking the ground with Mike Ned, a seasoned navvy from Cornamona he had met the previous day in Northampton:

Mike Ned showed me how to go about it properly – not to lift he pick too high and to hit in the same place always and not to be hitting haphazardly with it. I worked better after that and I tried hard because I didn’t want any of the lads saying: ‘What kind of a man is that that can’t work like a proper navvy?’ We worked away and when the first break came at ten o’clock I had blisters on my hands and my back felt as if somebody had been laying about it with a stick.

On the construction site workers were subjected to harsh regimes of physical labour that frequently threatened the integrity of their bodies and minds. As MacAmhlaigh describes, by ten o’clock on his first morning his hands were blistered and his back wracked with pain. But in these accounts such regimes were never simply metaphors for exploitation, but corporeal mechanisms of subjectification through which distinctive conceptualisations of work-based masculinity were generated. If the heavy, arduous, dangerous character of the work regime threatens the viability of the body and self, those traits and competencies which enable conquest of the regime may become encoded as valorised ideals of manliness, linking the work process and masculine selfhood together in a manic reciprocity. In this way, status and inclusion within the work space are governed by one’s ability to embody machismo ideals of strength, power, endurance and risk-taking; weakness, idleness and cautious self-preservation, as traits associated with the ever-present threat of castration posed by the regime, must be eliminated. The work process is thus simultaneously a site of

self-construction and mutilation, able to ‘make or break a man’, and MacAmhlaigh’s anxiety concerns the recognition of his fellow workers as much as the effects of the work task upon his body: he ‘tried hard’ to embody the image of ‘a proper navvy’ lest his manhood be called into question.

Issues of national identity played into this culture of masculinity in various ways. As noted, the practice of men from rural Ireland migrating to work in the British construction industry was not a new phenomenon in the post-war period but a long-run continuity, one that helped cement stereotypes of the Irishman as a rough labourer within the wider British culture. However, if such associations were expressive of a particular form of otherness within British culture, Irishness within the construction industry could function as a distinctive form of capital. Because migrant Irish labour was plentiful, mobile and flexible, it was valued by British and Irish contractors operating under conditions of fluctuating demand, and such firms developed distinctive ways of recruiting, managing and remunerating it. As well as employing much Irish labour on ‘The Lump’, a system which enabled both contractors and labourers to de-fraud the tax system, firms might seek to coax Irish men into ever-greater feats of work through appeals to a mythology of Irish masculine prowess with a pick and shovel.

Irish gangers and foremen, drawn by contractors from the most ambitious and robust of the Irish labour army to manage it at the point of production, were themselves incorporated into this mythology as merciless figures who exploited young Irishmen in order to secure their own bonus. While working on the Kilsby tunnel near Rugby in 1957, Donall MacAmhlaigh encountered an ‘ill-mannered buck from county Mayo’, whom, it seemed, ‘nobody could satisfy’:

Three wagons of concrete pipes came along with each pipe weighing about a hundredweight and, when we started to lift them out of the wagons at two men to a pipe, he nearly burst with rage.

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209 Jackson, *The Irish in Britain*, p. 98.
‘Two men to carry one of those things’, he bellowed, ‘I’d lift one of them with my little finger on a bad day. I don’t know what kind of shrimps they’re sending over from Mary Horan’s since the war. When I came over, they were sending men not women’.

With that, he grabbed one of the pipes and swung it up over his head just as if it had been a sod of peat. If you only saw the arms that man had when he took hold of the pipe with the muscles standing out like huge thick ropes, you’d say that no man on earth could ever stand up to him.\(^{210}\)

MacAmhlaigh’s account of this episode provides a good example of the ways in which Irish hypermasculinity could be employed to secure hierarchical discipline and enhance productivity on the site. At the same time, however, his representation of the foreman’s actions belie admiration for the display of power and strength being projected, linking it through the simile ‘a sod of peat’ with the bog-lands of rural Ireland. As well as a description of a form of regulation, the representation thus works to mythologize the ganger’s performance of the navvy identity as a distinctively Irish way of embodying the code of masculinity governing understandings of self on site.

Such images of masculine identity shaped Denis’s memories of working in construction in various ways in his narrative. I asked Denis, who was still working as a ground worker at age 83 when the interview was carried out, what the industry was like when he began work in the post-war period:

**Barry:** And what was the, tell me a bit about the construction industry, erm, back then. What was the construction industry like to work in?

**Denis:** Well, way harder than it is now. Because you had no compressors or nothing. You had no hydraulic… there was no hydraulics. The hydraulics hadn’t come in for a bit after. We only thing we did have, the pick-axe and the shovel, and the… and the graft and that was it.\(^{211}\)

Read as description, Denis’s account of what the industry was ‘like to work in’ is factually accurate. As noted, low levels of investment within the industry right up until the mid-1970s meant that work was highly labour intensive. At the same time, however, Denis’s decision to highlight this particular aspect of his experience may be seen to establish a contrast


\(^{211}\) Denis Heaney, p. 14.
between past and present on the basis of how ‘hard’ the work process was, and by proxy, the
men embedded within it. The ‘pick-axe and the shovel’ is not only a description of the tools
then available, but constitute affective objects, narratively rendered here as symbols
expressive of the greater toughness of a generational ‘we’ into which the first person voice
is blended. A strategy of composure is thus at work whereby the very rigors of the work
regime are mobilised in order to secure recognition for the self’s past achievements,
measured here in terms of the ideal of ‘graft’ embodied in ‘the pick-axe and the shovel’.

This strategy of composure is here shaped and derives strength from the ways in which the
images of masculine identity on which Denis draws have been routed into a complex
cultural circuit that has developed over the second half of the twentieth century in Britain. In
the post-war period, major centres of Irish settlement such as Manchester, Birmingham and
London were scene to the development of localised Irish particular publics which built upon
and reshaped pre-war formations. This involved not only the extension of the social network
associated with the Catholic church and ‘official’ bodies such as the county associations, but
the development of a semi-formal urban leisure culture, fuelled by migrants’ new consumer
power and centring on a circuit of Irish pubs and dancehalls typically established within or
near zones of dense Irish settlement. Heavily frequented by manual labourers, the culture
of sociability generated within these spaces was unavoidably shaped by the work
experiences of such men, such that, in the decades following the war, they became sites for
the oral transmission of stories about the situations and characters encountered on the
building site. In John B. Keane’s popular novel The Contractors the story’s protagonist, Dan
Murray, is taken to a regular haunt of the Irish labourer not long after his arrival in London
in 1952, a pub in Kilburn High Road designated by his drinking companion as ‘the buck
navvy’s paradise’:

Here he can drink and mate and fight. What more does a red-blooded man want? Here he
will hear the sagas of the legendary long-distance men and the tough tales of the present-day
ones who cannot stay for more than a season in the same place. If you are a buck navvy and
want to stay a buck navvy this is the place to be.

\[212\] On the music-making cultures in post-war London and Birmingham see Richard Hall; ‘Irish Music and
University, 2011).

As the novel’s date of publication indicates, the images circulated within such spaces did not disappear with the gradual suburbanisation of the post-war migrant population, but have been reproduced (and reshaped) during the remainder of the century. As Richard Hall has documented, a distinctive feature of the migrant leisure culture that developed in post-war London and other cities of settlement was the transplantation of domestic music-making practices from rural Ireland to Irish pubs and dancehalls in these cities. However, although this transplantation necessarily involved important innovations in style and performance, the writing of new songs does not appear to have been common practice in the immediate post-war period. Rather, songs about the experiences of the Irish in post-war Britain would only begin to be produced in the 1960s, emerging as a result of the fraternisation between leading members of the leftist British folk song movement and a small number of players associated with the Irish music-making scene in London.²¹⁴ Although songs such as Eoin MacColl’s ‘Tunnel Tigers’, Christy Moore’s ‘Paddy on the Railroad’ and Dominic Behan’s ‘McAlpine’s Fusilier’s’ differed markedly in tone, they all nevertheless materialised a highly masculine image of ‘Paddy’ which mythologized his extraordinary feats of physical labour. What is more, the images of experience generalised within these songs have proved popular with Irish audiences in Britain. ‘McAlpine’s Fusiliers’ in particular has become a staple of The Dubliner’s live sets when touring in Britain, and construction workers themselves are reported to have sung the song while travelling on lorries to and from sites:

As down the glen came McAlpine's men
With their shovels slung behind them
'Twas in the pub they drank the sub
And out in the spike you'll find them
They sweated blood and they washed down mud
With pints and quarts of beer
And now we're on the road again
With McAlpine's fusiliers²¹⁵

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²¹⁴ See Moran, ‘Sites of Diaspora’, chap. 2, for an account of the interaction between socialist politics and Irish music-making in 1960s Birmingham.
Such images may be seen to subvert negative British constructs of the Irish worker by re-claiming stereotyped markers of Irish male roughness and transforming them into positive signifiers of a highly militarised Irish labouring masculinity. Yet, not all elements within the Irish community necessarily viewed such roughness as a positive characteristic. As recent work has emphasised, if the post-war decades were ones of significant cultural change in Britain, such change generated complex conservative anxieties, for which post-war immigrants were often key repositories.  

Although the Irish migrant was not produced as a constitutive other of the British national imaginary in the way that black migrants were, the apparent propensity of some young Irishmen towards drunkenness, brawling, petty crime and tax evasion was problematised and documented by journalists, magistrates and social scientists over the period. This involved not only the replenishment of pre-existing negative stereotypes, but an attempt to re-inscribe ‘Irish roguery’ within new social scientific paradigms of ‘delinquency’. Irish masculinity was not represented as a threat to the British ‘race’ in the way that black masculinity was, but it remained a problematic formation in British culture, seen as unable to self-regulate in the absence of the sending society’s ‘potent controls against wrong-doing and law-breaking’.

The crucial point here is that the actors and bodies directly concerned with the welfare of Irish migrants in Britain negotiated this construction of the rowdy Irishman by attempting to split him off from the ‘respectable’ majority. On the one hand, spokesmen for the migrants sought to point out that representations of rough behaviour amongst Irish migrants were unrepresentative of the whole. In 1961, in the context of intense public debate over plans to restrict immigration from the ‘New’ Commonwealth, the BBC aired a Panorama documentary that explored how London-based male Irish migrants viewed their position in Britain, asking migrants whether they thought they had ‘any more right to be here than anyone else?’. In one exchange, shot against the backdrop of a busy building site in Westminster, the presenter asked an unknown spokesman about the Irishman’s reputation for rowdy behaviour:

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- One hears a lot of talk about hooliganism amongst the Irish, now is this justified?

- It’s something I have often felt strongly about. I think that everyone notices the drunken Irishman who picks a row outside a pub, but the dozen fellows that walk quietly along the street, nobody says he is an Irishman.\(^{220}\)

At the same time, as well as seeking to portray the Irish as respectable under the gaze of a British audience, the opposition here invoked, between ‘the drunken Irishman’ and ‘the dozen fellows that walk quietly along the street’, also formed the basis of a regulatory discourse which used the former construct as a cautionary device. Instead of contesting the image of ‘the drunken Irishman’, throughout the 1940s, 50s and 60s the observations of Catholic clergy and welfare workers in Britain, both Irish and English, frequently echoed the views of British sociologists, that Irish ‘hooliganism’ was an effect of the moral deregulation migrants encountered in urban settings. In effect, Irish Catholic observers, who equated rowdyism with encroaching secularisation, co-operated in producing young Irish masculinity as a problem since this legitimated the church’s ongoing efforts to regulate the behaviour of the migrant in the city.\(^{221}\) An important part of this regulation was the valorisation of a counter-image to that of ‘the drunken Irishman’ which, drawing on the established construct of the young Christian worker, idealised respectable virtues of hard work, steadfastness, religiosity and family.\(^{222}\)

Over the second half of the twentieth century, as sections of the migrant population have sought to participate in the politics of British multiculturalism, this ideal of the honest, hardworking Irishman has become central to attempts to fashion a positive public image for Irish migrants. In the final decades of the century in particular, as the tensions generated through the ‘The Troubles’ have subsided and Irish welfare groups have played an increasing role in multicultural politics, the idea of the Irish work ethic has been reinforced within communal memory via a proliferation of commemorative practices taking place at a variety of levels. In order to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of Chorlton Irish club in South Manchester, for example, John O’Dowd, one of its founding members, produced a

\(^{220}\) Panarama, BBC 1, November 1961. http://www.bbc.co.uk/panarama

\(^{221}\) The Catholic journals The Furrow, Christus Rex and Studies ran numerous articles on the problem of young Irish men in the city, often drawing on small-scale case studies of particular parishes in England. See, for example, Matthew Russel, ‘The Irish Delinquent in England’, Studies, 53 (1964), pp. 129-141.

\(^{222}\) One prescriptive tract described the ideal Catholic man as ‘a good husband and father who will be hardworking and faithful’. See Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, A Catholic Handbook for Irish Men and Women Going to England (Dublin, 1953), pp. 18-19.
history of the club, which he read out at a meeting of the founding members on 22 February 1985. The following extract was read out again at the author’s funeral mass in 1997, and subsequently reproduced in a 2006 popular photographic history of ‘Irish Manchester’, published as part of a ‘Britain in Old Photographs’ series by Sutton publishing:

Immediately after we arrived in England was the hardest time. We had no reserves of money and we had to find work. We didn’t go queuing at the labour exchange looking for benefits, we travelled to get work. Wherever there was muscle needed for the job the Irish were hired. It didn’t matter how menial or poor the conditions, we were conditioned by the rigours of life to work, which proved a very valuable form of education during these times.223

Such efforts to represent and commemorate the experiences of post-war migrants have thus cemented a powerful image of ‘Irish muscle’, ‘conditioned by the rigors of life to work’, within the communal mythology of the Irish in modern Britain. As regards the production of private memories, such images provide Denis with a means of framing his own experiences:

Barry: Did you ever have any, erm, English men working with you, whenever you were working in the construction industry?
Denis: No.
Barry: No?
Denis: No, no. I… I had a fella of my own…and we moved up here, and, er, I’ve had him up to four, five years ago. Six years, maybe six, seven years ago. But, er, I never seen an English man before that.
Barry: Mm hm. And why do you think that was? Why do you think there wasn’t so many of them working?
Denis: Well, because they couldn’t work with the Irish. I mean, in our… our job, they weren’t good enough.
Barry: The Irish men were better workers?
Denis: Better workers, yeah. Way better ground workers.
Barry: Mm. And why do you think that… why do you think the Irish men were such good workers?
Denis: Brought up to it, weren’t they? Brought up to… we were brought up to it in school, and when we left school we were brought up cutting turf, cutting… everything. Work all the time. So that… that’s what I would say was it, you know. Yeah, yeah.
Barry: Erm, and did you like working in the construction industry, or would you have preferred…
Denis: Oh, no, construction, yeah. That’s all I was used to all my life, that’s it. Digging and everything else.224

224 Denis Heaney, p. 21.
Although Irish and English men often worked with and alongside each other, particularly when employed for large British firms, the casual nature of work within the industry, together with the development of the subcontracting system from the 1950s, meant that Irish labourers often worked together in gangs, frequently, as in Denis’s case, composed of men from the same county. As this implies, an explanation of such clustering would need to take account of the ways in which Irish migrant’s habitus disposed them to work in ethnically homogenous work-groups, and the ways in which contracting firms, navigating the fluctuations of the market, recruited and utilised Irish labour. More generally, such dynamics may also be understood as part of a broader process whereby the concentration of Irish migrants in unskilled occupations, as ‘ground workers’, is a function of the enhanced occupational mobility of the British working class, both within the industry and the labour market more generally. Such was the view of Donal Foley and many others during the period.

For Denis, however, the absence of Englishmen was more simply explained: ‘they weren’t good enough’. In responding thus, Denis here draws on the communal myth of ‘Irish muscle’, not only to make sense of the life lived, but to construct a positive image of self from which he can derive a sense of personal achievement. The myth makes this possible due to the way it backgrounds negative aspects of the construction industry, enabling exploitative work relations to be viewed as a test of masculinity which Irish men easily pass because of their superior capacity for work. This capacity, moreover, is explained in terms of Irish men’s rural origins: such men were ‘conditioned by the rigors of life to work’; or as Denis put it: ‘we were brought up to it’. As well as a sense of achievement, then, the way in which the myth renders Irish men’s physical prowess within the industry continuous with the place left behind enables an integration of past and present, there and here: if migration necessarily disrupts and de-stabilises one’s sense of belonging, splitting identity between different places, the myth enables Denis’s experiences ‘here’ to be viewed as an extension of his experiences ‘there’, so that the past can remain a present truth of the self, so that ‘there’ can remain part of ‘here’.

‘the luck of the game’

Denis’s investment in the trope of ‘Irish muscle’ thus enables him to view his past in a positive light, facilitating the composure of the self in the present. A hitherto unaddressed
effect of this investment, however, is that the performance of work itself tends to be idealised within his narrative, to the exclusion of issues of remuneration, wealth and mobility. Such an exclusion is notable given the popular view of the period as one of growing ‘affluence’. Although the British economy’s rate of growth was sluggish relative to that of other European countries in the second half of the twentieth century, the post-war period witnessed rising incomes and the development of new patterns of consumption, inducing contemporary social scientists to proclaim the arrival of an epochal ‘affluent society’ defined in terms of enhanced purchase power, widespread availability of diverse consumer products, and rising social mobility and aspirations. As noted, Irish construction workers stood to benefit economically from these processes, even if their ‘working lives were primarily orientated towards facilitating homebuilding for the English population’. If increases in home-ownership were most concentrated amongst the English middle and upper working classes, it was nevertheless the very demand for housing, coupled with the privatisation and de-regulation of the construction industry in the 1950s, which enabled relatively high rates of pay and plentiful overtime for ‘unskilled’ labourers. As with other manual workers in Britain, such wages helped transform Irish construction workers into consumers in this period, an observation made time and again by numerous contemporaries.

One such was Donall MacAmhlaigh. Around midday one Saturday in April 1957 he called into the Admiral Rodney, a pub in Northampton, only to find a group of young Irish piece-workers talking incessantly about ‘work and money’:

The Irish at home, so far as I know, haven’t got this ugly habit – always talking about work and money – but they get as materialistic as the rest when they have been here a while. I’ve often been with workmen in a pub in Ireland and we always had plenty to talk about besides the daily job. They had all the best stories and traditional lore at the tips of their tongues – as you might expect of the Irish – but this crowd are interested in nothing beyond jobs and horses. What harm but most of them are from the West of Ireland!

For MacAmhlaigh, a regular mass-goer, the materialism he associated within British culture did not represent an aspirational ideal, and the preoccupation with ‘work and wages’ he observed of young Irishmen in the 1950s seemed to him an ugly disfigurement of the Irish national character. But as his own observations suggest, for many other Irishmen England represented an opportunity to enhance purchasing power and engage in popular forms of consumption. The construction industry was important here, not only because it enabled ‘unskilled’ migrants to earn good wages through piece-work, but because de-regulation and the availability of cheap money created conditions under which those who could save a relatively modest sum might go into business for themselves as private contractors.

Amongst the firms of contractors and sub-contractors that began to proliferate in the 1950s were numerous Irish firms, started by migrants who arrived in England without qualifications, prior business expertise or a skilled trade. And while many such firms would ultimately flounder in the face of market fluctuations, others would grow into successful businesses in the second half of the twentieth century. Around London in particular, Irish owned ‘subbies’ like McGinley, Gulmanda, O’Keefe, O’Rourke, and the Byrne Brothers became familiar names on the local scene and eight-figure turnover businesses in the 1980s. According to a survey of wealth within the industry in Construction News in 2000, first and second generation Irish owned firms then accounted for over 10% of the industry’s estimated £10 billion wealth, leading industry analyst Paul Fletcher to describe ‘the Irish’ as ‘a powerhouse in the construction industry’.  

As well as constituting a particularly dangerous and heavy form of work, the post-war construction industry thus provided some Irish migrants with the opportunity to acquire considerable wealth, and conceptions of masculinity engendered within the industry inscribed ideals of ‘affluence’ and material success as well as ‘graft’ and physical prowess. Although Denis does not explicitly make reference to material advancement in describing his experiences within the industry, a number of disclosures insinuate this was an underlying aspiration. At one point, Denis mentions that two of his sisters emigrated to America, prompting me to ask whether he ever had aspirations to move there himself to be near them:

Denis: [Laughs]. No. But if you’re… if you’d emigrated there (America) first, it would be the best country to work, to… to go to.

Barry: Why do you say that?

Denis: Well, the people that moved there the same time as me, they done very well for themselves.

Barry: Mm hm. Erm, was there a lot of men… I know in Manchester a lot of men came over here and done… done well as well.

Denis: Oh yeah. Bloody hell.

Barry: In construction and haulage, and things like that.

Denis: Done very… done… they’ve done marvellous. Awful lot of people, many people have done marvellous.

Barry: And why do you think that was?

Denis: Well they… they had a go at it and that was it. Look at the… all the wagons and all of that, and the… Some have gone very big and then some, you know…(pause)... And they got the break as well, you know. Some of them were groundworkers and they’re doing well as well, you know. Still luck of the game, isn’t it?

In designating America as ‘the best country to work’ in because ‘the people that moved there the same times as me, they done very well for themselves’, Denis makes audible a voice that evaluates the migration project in terms of economic advancement. Denis’s eagerness to work in construction was not only prompted by a desire ‘to go outside’ and to work amongst other Irish men, but by a desire to improve earnings, a motivation which presumably underlay his later decision to start ‘working for myself’ as a small sub-contractor with his partner from Kerry. At the same time, however, designating America as ‘the best country’ also implies that Denis has not fully achieved his own ambitions in this respect, and that he views a disparity in opportunities between Britain and America as responsible for this. This idea, that to do ‘very well’ presupposes conditions of opportunity beyond Denis’s control to secure, emerges again when he attempts to respond to the suggestion that ‘a lot of men came over here and done well…done well as well’. Where the superiority of Irish workers in the construction industry was earlier ascribed to the way such workers’ rural upbringing ingrained a formidable work ethic, the notable economic success of some of these workers is now explained in terms of chance: ‘they had a go’; ‘they got the break’; ‘luck of the game’.

These responses reveal a new aspect to the process of composure enacted through Denis’s narrative. If the opportunities for economic advancement within the post-war construction

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229 Denis Heaney, p. 26-27.
industry encouraged Denis to introject this as an aspirational ideal, the failure to realise this ideal in the way desired has problematised the self’s relation to it. This has in turn been handled through a form of defence by which the self’s investment in, and so dependence upon, that imago is devalued or denied. By explaining the success of other Irish men in terms of luck Denis does not simply devalue their achievement, but diminishes the importance of the ideal their success embodies to him as a measure of status and self-worth, and in so doing buffers the self from the feelings of inadequacy the reference to other Irish men’s success in construction activates. This dynamic may explain why the issue of material advancement is largely absent from Denis’s narrative, and may also be seen to shape his effort to compose his work identity in terms of the described myth of ‘Irish muscle’. On this reading, the split-off desire for status based on material success re-emerges as an investment in notions of superior Irish capacity for work.

It is important to add that this process of splitting is here conditioned by the way in which success within the construction industry has become a marker of status within the particular public of the Irish in Britain. Irish contractors have not only become powerful within the British construction industry, but major investors and leaders within this public, and efforts to represent the experiences of post-war migrants have repeatedly seized upon the life-stories of such men as exemplary instances of the ‘rags to riches’ tale. The central storyline of John B. Keane’s bestselling novel The Contractors, for example, makes use of this formula to chart the protagonist’s quest for wealth, status and recognition within the construction industry in 1950s London. Hailing from a small farming family in Kerry, Dan Murray arrives in London in 1952 with only ‘a few inadequate shillings’ and a powerful sense of ambition:

He knew something about London from listening to other young men who had come back home to Kerry on holiday. If a fellow worked his head he could get on in England, be promoted to chargehand or foreman or even become a subcontractor. This was where the real money was. J. B. Keane, The Contractors (Mercier Press, Dublin, 1993), pp. 6-7.

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Dan’s subsequent experiences closely follow the progressive trajectory here outlined. Having begun work as a bricklayer’s labourer the day after arrival, Dan soon establishes himself as ‘a good man’, and, through closely monitoring how things are done on site, quickly acquires the skill of bricklaying and a grasp of how the industry works.\textsuperscript{232} After a few years of hard work and careful saving Dan is able to put this knowledge into practice when he and his friend Eddie Carey start their own subcontracting firm. Through hard work and dedication the firm establishes ‘a good reputation’, and in four years Eddie and Dan have amassed £2000.\textsuperscript{233} Ever ambitious, ‘the dynamic young paddy’ now re-focuses on buying up and developing his own sites, and, demonstrating ‘the necessary drive, energy and brilliance to out-pace his contemporaries’,\textsuperscript{234} soon expands his business to the point where he ‘no longer worried about money’.\textsuperscript{235} Around this time Dan takes a trip to Ballynahaun, his home village, where his transformation from poor farmer’s son to self-made tycoon is ordained and celebrated in the local pub:

Later that night when Dan and his father went to the pub in Ballynahaun the after-hours customers wondered at Dan’s expensive suit, his suede shoes, his immaculate white shirt and silver grey tie. They pondered the exposure of white cuff, the teeth obviously well cared for, the unconscious ease and air of opulence that exuded from the man. Dan stood a round of drinks to the house and placing a twenty pound note on the counter instructed the publican to keep refilling as required. In whispers, the locals boasted about him to each other. A decent man. One of the richest men in the country. England must be a great bloody country. They listed off the other Kerrymen who had become millionaires from humble beginnings, who had boarded the emigrant ships at the North Wall, Dun Laoghaire and Rosslare with worn suitcases, no money and limited education.\textsuperscript{236}

As with the figure of the hardworking navvy, the self-made tycoon has become embedded within the communal imaginary of the Irish in post-war Britain, and is repeatedly deployed in popular community histories and by journalists writing for local newspapers and The Irish Post, the newspaper of the Irish in Britain. However, while this figure may provide a means of projecting an image of Irish achievement to audiences in Ireland as well as Britain, the constant rendering of successful Irish contractors as symbols of the mobility of an Irish community in Britain also works to solidify wealth and business success as norms by which

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{232} Keane, The Contractors, p. 22.  \\
\textsuperscript{233} Keane, The Contractors, p. 124.  \\
\textsuperscript{234} Keane, The Contractors, p. 198.  \\
\textsuperscript{235} Keane, The Contractors, p. 241.  \\
\textsuperscript{236} Keane, The Contractors, p. 251-52.
\end{flushright}
the value of the migration journey is measured. For those who fail to attain this ideal, in particular those who work in the field of construction, the valorisation of Irish success in the construction industry may induce feelings of personal inadequacy. In his narrative, Denis negotiates such feelings by backgrounding the issue of economic advancement and taking up instead the image of the hardworking Irish navvy, which provides an alternative means of securing a sense of recognition and status.

Bill, whom we met in the last chapter, interacts with this narrative of the self-made man in very different way in his memories of work in the construction industry. Born in 1951 in Roscommon in the west of Ireland, Bill grew up on his family’s 50 acre farm, the eldest of four siblings. After attending the local national school until age thirteen, Bill ‘went straight onto the land’, which, as the eldest, he had been chosen to inherit.\textsuperscript{237} Bill, however, did not aspire to the life of the farmer. In contrast to Denis, who equated work on the land with ‘freedom’ and ‘craic’, work in Bill’s second-person narrative was associated with exploitation, backwardness and constraint, frustrating the young self’s desire for play and competitive endeavour:

\begin{quote}
Everything was so manual, you didn’t have any tractors, you had a donkey and cart and that was it. Every… everything was done by, you know, by hand, erm… and you know, it was hard work, very, very hard work…. It wasn’t enjoyable. It was necessity [laughs], you know. Work had to be done, and it wasn’t that, er… you know… When you’re thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, you want to be out playing football and, and doing that type of thing.\textsuperscript{238}
\end{quote}

Bills desire to escape the grind of working life on the farm would eventually come to focus on the image of success projected by emigrants returned home on holidays. As Bill recalled: ‘all you’d seen was your forefathers and your uncles and all that, they’d gone to England, and had a made living’. Arriving in the village with ‘big cars’, ‘well dressed’ and with ‘plenty of money’, Bill realised that ‘if I worked… as hard as I worked on the farm, I’d make a living, and that’s exactly what… you know, what I did’.\textsuperscript{239}

\textsuperscript{237} Bill Duffy, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{238} Bill Duffy, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{239} Bill Duffy, p. 5.
In fact, Bill did more than ‘make a living’. Leaving in January 1967, aged 16, Bill immediately began work in the construction industry, taking a job with his uncle’s Manchester-based contacting firm, Reagan and Alwend. At this stage, Bill worked ‘as a labourer, ‘cos I had no qualifications, I had …er, no skills’. Eventually, however, Bill took a job with Kennedy’s, another Irish owned, Manchester-based contracting firm with whom he would work ‘all the way through’, and where he was soon promoted to ‘jointer’, a job that, although relatively unskilled, was nevertheless ‘a trade’ that carried with it greater responsibility: ‘cos if you left a leak, there was serious consequences’.

After working as a jointer for three to four years Bill’s progression up the occupational ladder accelerated: ‘then I was made up to a gangerman…I then became a foreman, after a number of years…and then I became a site agent, at twenty… two’. Becoming a site agent brought with it, not only increased wealth, but greater responsibility: ‘that entailed… you know, controlling men, gangs… responsible for… erm… profitability, for keeping the operation going, at times I had up to, what… four… four hundred men, er… working under me’. The level of responsibility and authority increased again when Bill became a contracts manager: ‘then I became a contracts manager. So I moved up along… A contracts manager then means that… you have a higher responsibility again…And I was only one of three, there was three of us’.

Nor did Bill’s progression stop at the position of contracts manager. In 1992, a number of years after Bill’s promotion, the company’s chairman and majority shareholder ‘wanted to go’. The ultimate result of this was that Bill, along with two other men and the aid of a venture capitalist, bought out the chairman, becoming shareholding executive directors of the company. Thereafter, and despite deep reservations about the prudence of involving ‘vulture capitalists’ in the company, the company went from strength to strength:

240 Bill Duffy, p. 12.
244 Bill Duffy, p. 14.
Anyway, we… ran the company under this new chairman and this new finance director, and we went from… whatever the turnover, thirty five, forty… thirty million or thirty five million, to a hundred and five million, in four years. You know, we just hit it right.\textsuperscript{245}

As a consequence of this steady expansion of the company, Balfour Beatty, the parent company to the venture capitalists, made a bid of forty eight million to buy the company, which Bill and his co-directors accepted. After staying on as director of Kennedy’s for a further three years, Bill finally took early retirement on a ‘final salary pension’:

‘Cos I was… er, thirty eight years service, with one company, erm… from, from the… labour trench, to the board, er… executive director one step up. Er… and the pension, we had a final salary pension, which was the best thing ever! If ever you get a chance to go on to, er… a pension, they’re hard to get now, is a final salary pension, it’s the best thing ever we did, and I had one, a pension off the company. So I retired, and… er, got out to hell. So that’s my working history!\textsuperscript{246}

Where Denis tends to background the theme of economic advancement in his narrative, emphasising instead themes of hard work and ‘graft’, Bill here tells a story about upward progression and material success within the construction industry, using the ‘rags to riches’ formula to organise his experiences and project an image of the self-made man. These differences in narrative strategy are not difficult to explain. If both Denis and Bill arrived in England with ambitions to ‘do well’ in construction, Bill has realised such ambitions to a much greater degree. Although Bill arrives in Manchester in 1967, at a time when the boom in construction was coming to an end, he has been able to reproduce the success he identified with his uncles and ‘forefathers’ who came to England before him, not by starting his own private subcontracting firm (the strategy adopted by Denis) but by working his way up within an established firm. Thus, although Denis and Bill both arrived in England from similar farming backgrounds and without qualifications, they entered the construction industry at different stages of development and had access to different kinds of opportunities. Whereas the standard route to economic advancement in the 1940s and 50s was through private subcontracting, the success and expansion of firms such as Kennedy’s

\textsuperscript{245} Bill Duffy, p. 15.  
\textsuperscript{246} Bill Duffy, p. 17.
by the late 1960s meant that an additional route had opened for later unqualified young migrants, namely through the internal company structure of established firms.

The establishment of social networks, which enabled the acquirement of forms social and cultural capital of value in the Irish-owned sections of the industry, may also have been important in Bill’s case. Not only did Bill’s uncles and ‘forefathers’ success in the 1940s and 50s set an example which the young Bill aspired to emulate, but these men established companies and contacts which the young Bill could make use of when he migrated to England. Although Bill would eventually take up employment with Kennedy’s, a rival firm to his uncle’s, Bill’s decision to migrate to Manchester rather than London was itself based on the fact that he could walk straight into a job with his uncle’s firm, while his uncle’s experience in the industry, in the form of learned knowledges and competencies, constituted a transmittable resource to which Bill would have had access. Bill’s upward trajectory within Kennedy’s, in other words, may have been aided by the fact that he already knew something about how the construction industry worked, and most importantly, knew what qualities and attitudes impressed foremen and bosses scouting for promotable workers.

‘You weren’t brought up with that. You had to learn that from yourself’

These points concerning the relationship between particular aspects of Bill’s habitus and changes in the field of construction in the later 1960s help explain important differences in Denis’s and Bill’s experiences within the industry, conditioning the latter’s take up of the ‘rags to riches’ formula within the interview. In turn, by framing his experiences in this way, Bill is able to compose himself as the protagonist in his own life-story, deriving in the process a powerful sense of recognition from the projected image of the self-made man. Nevertheless, this process of self-construction remains incomplete. En route to the narrative’s final dénouement certain obstacles frustrate the self’s complete realisation of its desired goal, intimating the existence of tensions beneath or within the projected image of success.

Most important here is education, a recurrent theme throughout Bill’s narrative. At each stage of Bill’s progression up the occupational ladder he makes reference, either to his lack
of skills or qualifications, or to the new tasks and skills he had to learn as he assumed new roles and responsibilities. As well as highlighting his increasing importance and status, Bill’s account of his progression through Kennedy’s often includes detailed descriptions of technical and administrative processes, illustrated through technical idioms designed to demonstrate a comprehensive grasp of such processes. More so than material wealth, Bill strove in the interview to demonstrate the acquirement of knowledge and learning, this being an object he placed much value on:

And… I think it was achievement as well, was that certain things that you did, in, in, in, in producing this and producing that, and… I think something that I never… at, at school, or… anything like that, was, you know, sitting in a board meeting, and… predicting something, and then doing a Powerpoint presentation or saying what you’re going to do, and then actually produce it. And producing reports for the board, and… you know, your, your, your, your, your, what your turnover was last month, or what your profitability’d be then, reporting going forward, and that type of thing. That was hard. That was hard, because you wouldn’t… You know, you didn’t go to university, y… you weren’t brought up with that. You had to learn that from yourself.247

As suggested above, Bill’s uncle’s and ‘forefathers’ experience within the construction industry may have equipped him with forms of capital that enhanced, relative to other rural migrants, his ability to navigate the relations of that field. However, as Bill climbs the company ladder, moving from the construction site to the office and boardroom, it becomes necessary to acquire new competencies and ways of thinking. If the dangerous, arduous character of the work regime on the building site engendered conceptions of masculinity that idealised machismo virtues of strength, toughness and ‘graft’, the very different work processes of the office, requiring new proficiencies in the use of electronic technology and business-related conceptual schemas, fostered the inscription of technocratic and managerial ideals within work-based conceptions of masculinity within the industry. In this respect, the distinction between ‘the Irish navvy’ and the ‘Irish businessman’ evokes differences in forms of embodied human and cultural capital as well as access to economic capital.

Bill’s ability to acquire these forms of proficiency represents a source of pride within his narrative, and his epic story of success, told to an audience identified with a learned institution, has as one of its central themes the transformation of the self from unskilled

247 Bill Duffy, p. 27.
farmhand to learned businessman. Set within the broader context of the re-working of middle class identities in post-war Britain around values of professionalism, managerialism and technocraticism, this narrative of transformation may be seen to entwine stories about mobility and cultural assimilation.\textsuperscript{248} As the above extract indicates, however, ambivalence still attaches to this transformation. After narrating his progressive story of success in the first person voice, in the above extract Bill shifts to the more awkward second person when describing the technologies and processes of the boardroom, making visible a sensitive relation between the imago symbolised by these objects and the self. This sensitivity derives from an insecurity about one’s ability to master the new forms of knowledge necessary for competency within the boardroom, an insecurity itself based on the fact that ‘you weren’t brought up with that’. Indeed, not only did Bill not attend secondary school, having left school at thirteen to work on the land, but the schooling he did receive was marred by the brutal teaching practices he encountered in the classroom, leaving him with bad memories of this part of his childhood:

This teacher that I was talking about earlier, he… was very fond of using the… cane… [whistles] He was, he was, er… I used to go to school, and it wasn’t teaching, it was you know… I wasn’t a great speller, no, and still isn’t, er… er… able to spell, you know. Yes, I can spell, I can get through, and, and no problem at all, but he used to have us out there and if you… missed a spelling, he’d take you out by the blackboard, you’d stand there… and all of the other people, maybe twenty five people in the class, and each one that had failed’d be taken by the blackboard and stand there until they’d finished the whole round. And then he’d give you two slaps on that hand with a blackthorn rod, and two slaps on that hand. I’ve come home from school with a bone there, and a bone there, used to be black. You know, that’s not teaching.\textsuperscript{249}

Although Bill was dissatisfied with his working life on the farm and would later seek to escape it, one benefit of leaving school at 13 to work full-time on the land was that he would no longer have to endure the violence and humiliation meted out as teaching in the classroom of his local school. Taking up the role of farm labourer, these damaging experiences could be split-off and forgotten. Years later, however, having swapped the roles of farmhand and construction worker for businessman, Bill is forced to re-negotiate the legacy of these classroom traumas. Not only did Bill’s career trajectory necessitate a

\textsuperscript{248} On the re-working of middle-class identities see Mike Savage, ‘Affluence and Social Change in the Making of Technocratic Middle-Class Identities: Britain, 1939-55, Contemporary British History 22, 4 (2008), pp. 457-476.
\textsuperscript{249} Bill Duffy, p. 5.
rapprochement with learning, but this took place within a context where education was becoming a core value within the managerial ethos of the commercial middleclass as it worked to differentiate itself from the increasingly ‘affluent’ working-class. It was in this period too that ‘thick paddy’ jokes became a ubiquitous feature of British popular culture, forming a staple element of stand-up comedy routines on popular entertainment shows such as Bernard Manning’s *The Comedians,*\(^{250}\) and on popular sitcoms such as *Fawlty Towers*\(^ {251}\) and *Only Fools and Horses.*\(^ {252}\) Thus, Bill’s rapprochement with learning was a ‘hard’ experience, leaving him in the present with feelings of bitterness towards those he holds responsible for having failed to prepare him for the challenges he faced:

I went home on holidays from… England, and I had reason to go to the post office, to see… he had retired at this stage… and er… who did I walk into, but… Gerald O’Connor. And a big shake hands and a big smile. So… he says to me, “How are you Bill?” And I says, “Not too bad.” He says, “I believe you’re doing very well in England.” I says, “I’m not doing too bad.” He says, ‘Bill’… He says, “You have a lovely car.” I had a… 2000T Cortina, brand new, it was… it was… a lovely car. And he’d just bought a 2000, it wasn’t a 2000T, and the difference was the vinyl roof, and… all this, er, what do you call it… He says, “Well, the,” he says, “I’ve just bought a car that’s similar,” he says, and… he says, “I believe,” he says, “from the grapevine, that you’re doing very well.” And I says, “Gerald, it’s like this, “ I said, “it’s no thanks to you.” I says, “You didn’t teach us,” I says, “you tried to beat it into us.” And I says, “That’s not teaching.” And… I was going to give him another… And I says, “No, I’ll leave it at that.” And I walked out. Well, I got my stamps and I walked out, and left him at that. But it put a bit of thought in his head; it wasn’t teaching, it was… he was… he wasn’t trained properly…\(^ {253}\)

This story of the 2000T Cortina enacts a distinct form of composure, one that combines a form of manic defence with a strategy of displacement as it makes use of the image of the successful, self-made man. As Bill’s career in England progresses his struggle to learn the competencies of the office and boardroom threatens the positive imago of the businessman with which the self is now identified, generating feelings of loss, inadequacy and shame. In an alternative phantasy, the ego might be protected from such feelings by actively splitting-off and denigrating the valued imago, so as to justify the denial of the self’s dependence on it. Such a defence, however, would involve alienation from a career in which Bill has a deep investment. In the phantasy enacted here a relation to the valued imago is thus preserved through the displacement of aggressive impulses onto Bill’s old teacher, who becomes thereby the deserving object of contempt. Omnipotent control is reasserted over the internal

\(^{253}\) Bill Duffy, p. 6.
world in a triumphalist phantasy where Bill’s teacher, constituted now as the ‘bad object’, is ‘cut down to size’ in a verbal act of vengeance, enabling Bill to assert independence from and mastery over the defeated threatening imago: ‘Gerald, it’s like this. It’s no thanks to you’. In this process, the thing at the root of Bill’s anxiety, namely his lack of education, is implicitly idealised, becoming a measure of Bill’s ability to succeed without the help of others, through his own hard work. The Cortina 2000T, with all its phallic connotations, does not just symbolise Bill’s material success or upward mobility; it signifies the self-made character of the newly fashioned identity and stands as a rebuke to those who doubted Bill’s ability to ‘make something of himself’ in the past.

‘When you’re with them long enough’

Such manic splitting enables the achievement of a particular form of composure. As Graham Dawson explains, ‘the self is enabled to own, justify and enjoy the aggressive and destructive aspects of its own nature, without arousing feelings of loss, guilt and mourning on behalf of the destroyed imagos’.254 Such splitting, however, also exacts a toll:

The cost of manic pleasure...lies in the reciprocal effect upon the self of the phantasies that it holds about its objects. Untransformed hostility and aggression that is directed in this way towards the other, and that is felt to exist only because of the other, continues to have reciprocal but unconscious consequences that impact back upon the self. In effect, certain of its own aspects are split-off and repeatedly attacked as worthless by other, idealised aspects felt to be superior.255

In Bill’s story of the Cortina 2000T composure may be seen to rest on a basic contradiction. Although the aim of the phantasy is to establish the self’s independence from the ‘bad object’, by displacing aggression onto his old teacher Bill implicitly makes him responsible for the anxieties he seeks to manage. Thus, while Bill endeavours to deny the dependence of the self upon the denigrated ‘bad object’, the displacement of aggression onto it reveals that the internal psychic landscape remains structured through relation to it, a relation which continues to unsettle the self in the present.

255 Dawson, Soldier Heroes, p. 40.
This act of displacement in turn plays into a broader tension concerning the interplay between issues of mobility, assimilation and belonging. In Denis’s narrative above we saw how ‘there’ could reinforce the present truth of the self ‘here’. In accordance with a communal myth of ‘Irish muscle’, Denis presented his experiences of working on the farm and bog in Ireland as underpinning his formidable capacity for work in England, enabling integration of past and present, there and here. By contrast, ‘there’ repeatedly figures as an object of bitterness and contempt in Bill’s narrative, limiting the self’s efforts to realise the ideals that come to be identified with ‘here’. In his memories of growing up in Roscommon Bill denigrates work on the farm, his father’s drinking and the strangle-hold a village hierarchy of priest, teacher, postmaster and pension officer had over local affairs. Indeed, when I ask Bill about why he had never felt like moving back to Ireland ‘Irish people’ as a whole are positioned as the other:

Irish people are very territorial as… as far as that’s concerned. And… it’s one thing a guy coming in that was… brought up… in the village, and, and, and… buying a bit of land, you know, that was up for sale, and is open to anybody to buy! But when a stranger comes in, that’s when it really, you know… They’ll be nice to his face, but they’ll be, you know… it’ll be backstabbing. But… [sighs] they don’t like it… in Ireland. Even… even though you were born in the village they don’t like you going back. ‘Cos you’re taking something from them, it’s, it’s… whether it’s out of the… overall scenery, the parish overall, or the little village confines, he’s going to be taking something from them. And they’re very narrow-minded people, Irish people can be very, very narrow-minded as far as that’s concerned.256

Although the use of second and third person forms here works to objectify the local jealousies being described, in this narrative Bill implicitly aligns himself with the figure of the ‘stranger’, indicating his alienation from the village he was born into. Although Bill had the money to buy up local land, he did not do so because of the perceived narrow-mindedness and duplicity of local people: ‘they’ll be nice to his face, but they’ll be, you know…it’ll be backstabbing’. Such an explanation has paranoid intimations. Bill’s alienation from his home village has incurred a sense of loss. However, instead of explaining this in terms of Bill’s success in England, blame is projected onto ‘Irish people’, who become thereby persecutory imagos. This in turn induces a further dichotomisation of the social (and psychic) world and a highly oppositional form of identification: in defining

256 Bill Duffy, p. 11.
‘Irish people’ as ‘narrow-minded’, Bill defines himself as ‘open minded’, differentiating himself from the persecutory ‘they’.

Having thus defined ‘Irish people’ as the other, it does not, however, automatically follow that ‘here’ becomes a securely constituted site of the self. On the contrary, Bill’s narrative of work in England evidences further splitting in relation to the issue of belonging. During the interview I asked Bill about the popular view of contractors as ruthless and exploitative, to which he responded: ‘sometimes you had to be ruthless’:

So anyway, there was one or two of them then that decided to… I said, “Right,” I says, “vans and wagons has to be in the yard at two o’ clock, locked up.” And I said, “You can please yourself what you do then, it’s Friday or Saturday, you can drink or do what you like. But,” I says, “the vans and stuff has to be all tidied up.” These two gangs or three gangs, no, they stayed in the beer hall, so, the next day… out I come, and I says, “Come here. Come on. On your way.” Had to sack them… had to show an example because… part of the, you know… thing is that, if you lose control… of, you know, especially construction workers, er… they’ll, they’ll control you. And… you know, you’re the pay master, you pay them, you agree their wages, you agree this, you give them subs, and that was another thing that was done, on a daily basis, was the subs. Erm… and, you know, you had to be ruthless.257

As well as requiring him to learn new skills, Bill’s occupational advancement within construction has positioned him within the role of manager within the workplace, necessitating the acquisition and deployment of forms of discipline that enable him to maintain control over the men under him. This in turn establishes a division between Bill and the men: rather than deny the view of contractors as ‘ruthless’, Bill endeavours to justify the deployment of ruthless managerial practices as necessary for the maintenance of authority within the work environment, setting in play a differentiating logic that assigns Bill and those working under him into opposing ‘you’/‘them’ categories. As the associated opposition between the workplace and pub in this story implies, differences based on relations within the space of work potentially extended to social and cultural practices beyond it. As Bill states a little further on:

257 Bill Duffy, p. 22.
That’s something I would never do, is… even at Christmas time or any time, was to go into the pub with any of the lads I employed. I would always keep that completely… If I met them out, yeah, I’d buy them a drink and so-and-so, so-and-so. But I would never socialise with them, because if there’s any bit of, er… aggro, that’s the time it’ll come up, er… when they’ve about… the sixth… sixth pint, it’ll, it’ll, it’ll, it’ll surface.258

As well as complicating Bill’s relation with his home village in Roscommon, advancement within the construction industry has also encouraged a process of social differentiation from sections of the Irish ‘over here’, involving avoidance of those spaces, such as the pub, dancehall and Irish centre, typically frequented by Irish labourers in cities like Manchester. As Bill acknowledges at various points in the interview, this sharp separation between work and social life not only entails a distancing from aspects of the Irish community in Britain, but simultaneously implies a convergence with post-war ‘English’ values and ways of life:

**Barry:** Erm… do you think you’ve changed? Er, since you’ve er, been…
**Bill:** Aye. I suppose I have, yes. Because, you know, coming from a farming background, and you have to change. You know, you have to come more of a city… dweller, and er… Yeah, I suppose I have, erm…
**Barry:** Good changes or bad changes, or?
**Bill:** You’ll have to ask her that! [Laughs] Aye, I think it’s for the good. It’s, yes, we can, erm… we’ve set out our stall to… have our own house, paid for, and have it the way we want it, and… erm, done the extension she wanted, and, and… set out the way… we wanted it together, and… quite comfortable. It’s too big. I keep telling her but she doesn’t want to sell it! Erm… and er… you know if you were in Ireland, you’d be out farming or doing something like that. At seven o’ clock in the evening you can come in and sit down and watch the… football or watch whatever we watch, and relax or go on the computer, or do whatever you… If you want to go for a meal, you go for a meal. If you want to… cook, or whatever. Yeah. It’s er… I have changed in that line. I suppose I’ve come more… English…fied, or English whatever you call it, er, er… in that way. ‘Cos I suppose when you’re… you’re with them long enough, ‘cos I’m forty… three, forty four years now, forty three, forty four years here now, so… That’s a long time.259

In composing his memories of work in England, Denis drew on a narrative of ‘Irish muscle’ as a means of establishing a form of continuity between past and present, there and here. When Denis is asked if he thought he had changed since he came to England he answered in the negative: ‘I don’t think I changed…[laughs] I don’t think I changed too much!'
By contrast, Bill has drawn on a narrative of the self-made man to construct the experience of migration as transformative. This transformation concerns economic status, but it also involves a linked distancing from the place left behind and a positive identification with the place of settlement. Particularly following retirement, this positive identification has come to focus on a home-centred vision of ‘affluence’ rather than an image of the modern businessman. Prompted to elaborate on his understanding of how he has changed, Bill offers a privatised image of domesticity in which he is envisioned relaxing at home and which he associates with ‘Englishness’. Yet Bill’s very recognition of this privatised domesticity as ‘English’ reveals the doubled character of belonging in his narrative. In order to respond to the question, to make sense of change, here must be read in relation to there, a comparison must be drawn between the rural life of the Irish farmer and the English city dweller. However great the social and cultural distance travelled, however long ‘you’re with them’, the transformation is thus never total, the severing of the past never complete.

‘The money was good, the work was hard’

Like Bill, my final respondent, Joe, sought to compose his experiences of settlement in England in the form of a progressive story of ambition and success. Born in 1944, Joe grew up in Longford on his family’s fourteen acre farm, the eldest of four brothers. After attending the local national school until age 14, Joe took a two year course in woodwork at a local vocational college, before working for around 18 months on Moor Glamona, a local turf cutting plant. When, however, Joe’s younger brother came home from Birmingham for Christmas in 1962, Joe was struck by the transformation in his appearance, prompting him to return with his brother to England at the end of the holidays:

My brother came over, my younger brother, came over first, he was the first one to come over here, and he came to Birmingham 1962.. he stayed, he came here in July and he stayed here ‘til Christmas and came home for a holiday at Christmas time, anyway ah.. I saw he had lovely clothes, nice new watch, well dressed n everythin’ like that, and I decided to take the emigrant boat along with him.  

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[^260]: Denis Heaney, p. 22.
Joe went first to Birmingham, a major centre of immigration and manufacturing in this period, where he took a job in the paper factory where his brother was working. Neither the job nor the city, however, were to Joe’s liking, in part because he considered ‘the Irish’ were ‘never’ ‘accepted’ in the city. Yet, despite this, and the severity of the famous winter of 1963 (by which point Joe had taken a job in the construction industry), Joe was determined not to give up his ambition of ‘making it’:

Barry: Did you ever think of going back?
Joe: [pause] Er….I had the choice of going back, one time, 1963..it was a very, very bad winter here, 1963, terribly bad winter....cold, the frost was that bad, on the ground, 2 foot it was a that time, terribly, terribly bad winter, it lasted to the month of May...my father, God be good to him, he was on to us to come home but pride would not let us.

Barry: Why not?
Joe: [pause] I dunno, we just had our mind made up, I had my mind made up I was going to make it here and that was it...I come here, I’m not going back.

Joe did, however, move to Manchester in 1964, where he eventually found work with a contractor as a tunnel digger, a form of employment he would remain in until retirement. It was this work, which Joe emphasised ‘paid well’ but was ‘hard’, that was responsible for the ultimate success of the migration venture:

England was good to me, very good to me, I have to say that like you know, brought up my family, brought up here, everything like that and... I worked in the construction industry then for a lot of years, I worked underground, tunnel work and all that... so I did, erm, earned good money and made a good home and a good livin’ for myself.

Bill’s and Joe’s narratives thus share important features in common: both tell progressive stories about the realisation of personal ambitions which work to construct the migration project as a success. Yet, there are also important differences. As we have seen, material success was not the only, nor even the most, valued aspect of Bill’s experiences in England. His narrative was filled with lengthy, detailed descriptions of different work tasks and the changing roles he performed as his career progressed. By contrast, Joe’s narrative of success tends to bypass his experiences as a tunnel digger to focus on the material rewards. Even when prompted, Joe condenses his work experiences into the curt evaluative phrase ‘the money was good, the work was hard’:

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Barry: So you worked in the construction industry then?
Joe: I did, yeah
Barry: And what was that like, workin’ in that?
Joe: It was…it was, alright like, you know, the money where I worked as a job, I was in like where I worked a lot, I worked a lot on the railway tunnel, worked on that you know, the money was good, the work was hard
Barry: And was that Irish contractors?
Joe: Yeah, it was, Irish contractors but they paid well, but the work was hard.\textsuperscript{265}

One way of explaining differences in how Joe and Bill talk about their experiences of work concerns the very different kinds of work they did within the industry. Although Joe has, as he emphasises, ‘done very well’ from his work in the construction industry, he has not ascended the career ladder in the same way as Bill, but has worked for the most part as a tunnel-digger, a non-managerial if relatively lucrative role. This has meant that, although Joe has not had to negotiate the difficult process of learning boardroom skills, nor has he had access to the same forms of capital or discourses of identity associated with the acquirement of such skills: the image of the high-flying, worldly business man, who has acquired learning and culture as well as wealth, is not available to Joe for self construction in the way that it is to Bill. For Joe, work, and England more generally, is not valued in itself, but constitutes a means to an end.

However, Joe’s devaluation of ‘work’ in the phrase ‘the money was good, the work was hard’ concerns more than a lack of occupational mobility:

It’s been a …fairly… a fairly good life to me but unfortunately for….the last ten years I’ve….I’ve got arthritis in the base of the spine…and that was through mostly working in tunnel work and…getting wet and everythin’ like that so…I havn’t been workin’ for the last ten years… and I’m registered disabled as well like, y’know so…I havn’t been able to..to work…but er life has been good yeah, it has been good except its worse for the last ten years, I could say that…but er.. I’ve had a really good life.\textsuperscript{266}

Involving long hours of intensive labour in often damp conditions, and remunerated by piecework methods that encouraged workers to push their bodies to their limits, tunnel work constituted one of the most precarious and physically demanding, if relatively lucrative,

\textsuperscript{265} Joe Doherty, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{266} Joe Doherty, p. 1.
forms of work within the construction industry. As in other forms of heavy industry where earning power was closely related to workers’ readiness to expose their bodies to hazardous conditions, the work culture generated around tunnel work was highly machismo, and carried over into characteristic forms of masculine sociability beyond the workplace centring on heavy drinking and smoking. Popular representations of the Irish construction worker have thus revered the ‘tunnel tiger’ as epitomising machismo virtues of strength, endurance, competitiveness, risk-taking and hard drinking. Joe, however, avoids reference to his work experiences within the industry, precisely because the destructive effects of tunnel work upon his body constitute irrefutable evidence of his present inability to embody the manly ideals on which such an identity is based. This silence speaks not only of the physical toll exacted through years of punishing labour, of the constant bodily pain and loss of mobility; it implies too the loss of a valued, deeply internalised imago, leaving Joe with powerful feelings of inadequacy, loss, and possibly guilt.

These anxieties exert a powerful influence on how Joe constructs his experiences in the interview. Joe’s preferred narrative of material success enables him to reflect upon his life in England in a positive way: even if his years of work in the construction industry have cost him his health, he can derive satisfaction from the fact that this work has ultimately allowed for a good standard of living for him and his family, enabling him to fulfil the ideal of the breadwinner. However, as the product of a form of defensive splitting, this positive idealisation of the material rewards of work is concomitant with an attempt to diminish or deny the importance of work in itself to the self. This is narratively manifest, not only in Joe’s avoidance of the issue of work in the interview, but in the implication that tunnel work was exploitative. Implicit in the phrase ‘the money was good, the work was hard’, this tendency towards the disavowal of work as exploitative emerged more fully in response to questions about the reception of Irish people in England:

**Joe:** I mean, in Birmingham there during the war like for instance, or after the war, there’d be digs advertised, no dogs or no Irish, yeah, the factory was in Trafford Park there, where all the big industry was in Trafford Park, which is down here in

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268 See, for example, A. J. Sykes, ‘Navvies: Their Work Attitudes’, *Sociology* 3, 1 (1969), pp. 21-35. Sykes, however, was evidently influenced by the bold archetype of the navvy portrayed in the work of Patrick MacGill. See P. MacGill, *Children of the Dead End* (Edinburgh, 1914, 1999). More recently, the construct can be found in Patrick Campbell, *Tunnel Tigers* (Jersey City, 2000).
Manchester, the other side of Manchester, you’d see jobs advertised, outside, no Irish need apply

Barry: This is in Manchester?
Joe: Yeah
Barry: And what year would this be?
Joe: Arr, that’s be going back now in the early 50s like, before my time, I’ve never seen anything like that, I have never no, I haven’t, never, I’ve never seen it but...the Irish here, they got, the jobs they got here. English people they wouldn’t do it, do them, or they wouldn’t be paid to do it...they wouldn’t be paid, the tunnel work that I worked in, I never seen any English men do it.²⁶⁹

As noted earlier, popular perceptions of Irish migrants in post-war English cities were frequently discriminatory, reflecting both the resilience of pre-war stereotypes and the observed tendency of sections of the migrant population towards practices of heavy drinking, fighting and job-swapping. One consequence of this was that migrants, in particular male migrants, often encountered hostility when securing lodgings, a point frequently noted in the dairies and memoirs of post-war migrants.²⁷⁰ From the late 1970s, in a context in which the onset of ‘The Troubles’ lead to Irish people coming under suspicion in Britain, and where the discourse of ‘multiculturalism’ was emerging as a way of framing issues of identity within British public space, a range of actors associated with the Irish community began to recover such discriminatory experiences as a means of substantiating claims about the historic status of the Irish as a disadvantaged and discriminated-against minority in Britain. Drawing heavily on forms of ‘consciousness raising’ and community oral history, this process of recovery has helped solidify a powerful narrative of exclusion within the communal memory of the Irish in Britain, one that constructs the persistence of negative Irish stereotypes, Irish experiences within the labour and housing markets, high levels of Irish homelessness, alcoholism and mental health problems, and the surveillance of Irish people under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, as linked elements of a shared experience of discrimination, disadvantage and exploitation.²⁷¹

This narrative of exclusion and exploitation here shapes Joe’s interpretation of his own experiences. Although Joe himself never saw the notorious ‘no dogs, no Irish’ signs, in his

²⁷⁰ John B. Keane, for example, recalled that the many of the boarding houses on the street where he first lodged in Northampton in 1952 displayed the infamous ‘No negroes, no Irish’ signs, some with the addition italicised message: ‘That means you, Paddy!’. J. B. Keane, Self-Portrait (The Mercier Press, Cork, 1969), p. 42.
²⁷¹ The report to receive the most coverage in the national press, in part because it was published by the CRE, was M. J. Hickman and B. Walter, Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain (Commission for Racial Equality, London, 1997).
understanding they function as metonyms for a broad experience of Irish exclusion, one that includes the exploitation of Irish workers within the British labour market, and more specifically, the construction industry. Echoing the views of Donal Foley outlined in the introduction, Joe here presents Irish workers, himself included, as a ‘replacement population’, pressed into forms of work the native British refused to do:

The Irish in Britain were always hewers of wood and drawers of water, and so they have remained to this day…This was much in evidence during the war and post-war years in Britain, when it was the derided but mobile Paddy who willingly did all the dirty jobs for clean money…Often they had no tax cards, no insurance stamps. In fact, there were no records at all of many of them. They were hard working, well paid slaves, exactly what Britain wanted to rebuild their devastated country.272

By framing his experiences within this narrative, Joe is able to reinforce the strategy of defensive splitting deployed to negotiate the psychological effects of the injuries he sustained through his work as a tunnel digger. By constructing the construction industry as exploitative, tunnel work becomes a deserving object of disavowal, enabling it to be split-off without experiencing depressive emotions of loss or guilt. However, to reiterate Dawson, manic defences always ‘have reciprocal but unconscious consequences that impact back upon the self’. In implicitly denigrating the construction industry as exploitative, Joe constructs himself as the exploited, as a ‘hard working, well paid slave’. In so constructing himself as a victim of the actions of others, Joe jeopardises the very sense of agency and achievement his idealisation of the material rewards of tunnel work is designed to protect from the depressive effects of his injuries. In short, the narrative of victimisation threatens to undermine the coherence of the preferred narrative of material success, leaving Joe with an understanding of his life from which he can derive little satisfaction, even if it allows him to make sense of his injuries in a way that absolves the self from blame and enables the gratification of aggressive impulses.

As such, additional ways are sought to preserve the valued imago of migration success. Immediately after Joe’s story about the exploitation of Irish labour in Britain I asked him whether he though Irish men were ‘harder workers’:

**Barry:** Do you think that the Irish men were harder workers?

**Joe:** Oh yeah, oh, by far, by far, great workers, great, great workers, great workers.....The people that worked in that tunnel work when I was working there, a lot of them like myself are crippled up today, they worked terribly, terribly hard, but then, like I say, there was a lot of them worked hard and they spent their money, spent their money in the bar, I didn’t, no, you know... a lot of people, a lot, I’d say a lot of them a lot of them are well off like you know but there are a lot of them that spent their money really, really foolish, very, very foolish...  

As well as the recovery of post-war migrants experiences of popular hostility, the efforts of community activists to document the hidden history of Irish exclusion in Britain from the late 1970s has uncovered the neglected experiences of a generation of Irish men who, having spent many years living the itinerant life of the labourer in Britain, have ultimately ended up homeless or living in sheltered accommodation, often with alcohol and mental health problems. Since then, charity workers, community activists and film-makers have narrated the experiences of these men as a tragic story of alienation, suffering and loss, most recently in the moving documentary *The Men of Arlington House*. For Joe, however, who sits on the managerial board of a charity concerned with the welfare such men, this tragic story is re-worked into a cautionary tale, enabling him to contrast the hamartia of these men with his own good sense. Although Joe agrees that Irish men were ‘great workers’, unlike Denis he does not take up this subject position because, for him, it is tainted by the association with exploitation and injury: ‘a lot of them like myself are crippled up today’. Instead, Joe seeks to impose a hierarchical distinction within the category of Irish workers on the basis of how prudently they exercised restraint during their lives. By implicitly constructing such men’s downfall as retribution for their excessive lives, Joe is able to absolve his own actions from blame and re-establish a sense of agency, positioning his own restraint as responsible for his relative success. Through projecting his own anxieties onto the other, Joe is once again the protagonist in his own story, rather than a victim of circumstance.

‘the Irish round here’

The injuries Joe has sustained through his work in the construction industry, and the way he seeks to negotiate anxieties associated with these injuries, also have important implications...
for how Joe frames a sense of belonging within the interview. Unsurprisingly, given the way ‘England’, ‘work’ and ‘exploitation’ are metonymically linked in Joe’s narrative, ‘England’ does not constitute a site of belonging for him but is figured as a provider of goods and services. Although Joe ‘enjoyed England’ and ‘England was good to me’, it is never accorded the title of ‘home’; in sharp contrast to Bill, this is exclusively reserved for the place left behind:

To this day..I’m still delighted to go back, to go back to, to Ireland, Ireland is still my home, I regard it as my home, though I live here and I’m happy here, but Ireland to me is home.²⁷⁵

Yet, although Joe continues to regard Ireland as his ‘home’, he has no plans to return there:

Every Irish person you talk to, everyone had that dream, that you’d go back, you know, and I probably would of went back now, I probably would have went back when the boom was in Ireland, it started off ten year ago, if I was fit and well, I would have, definitely would have gone home that time, yeah, I wouldn’t not now, because the health service there is not as good as here….if I take bad here, the hospital is five minutes away from here, North Manchester….

Such were the severity of the injuries Joe sustained through working in construction that he has needed to undergo various operations to relieve the pain in his back and neck. In addition, Joe has had three heart attacks in the last ten years, one fairly recently. Given the fragility of Joe’s health, he is thus heavily reliant on medical care, and as he explains, provision ‘here’ is better than what is available ‘there’. Consequently, although Joe ‘would have went back’ some years ago, the condition of his health now makes this impractical. Thus, since securing the integrity of the self is dependent on securing the integrity of the body, desire is not straightforward in Joe’s narrative of belonging, even if the term ‘home’ is exclusively reserved for ‘Ireland’.

In fact, Joe’s designation of ‘Ireland’ as ‘home’ is not expressive of a desire to return, but of a de-territorialised sense of belonging related to an abstract idea of ‘Ireland’. During the interview I asked Joe what he missed most about Ireland:

²⁷⁵ Joe Doherty, p. 8.
What I have missed most about Ireland when I came here first time was... first of all...you know, you go to a neighbour’s house at home....that door was never locked, you just dipped the latch and walked in, you were welcome, never, never had that here, no, no, everyone...you know...you could go visiting friends here, I do, go visiting friends, my mate’s occasionally surely, alright, you know, but erm....I wouldn’t count it the same as Ireland but then, Ireland is that way now, you can’t....never, there never, when I was growing up in Ireland, there never was a lock...on our door, night or day...never, the door was never locked, you never had to lock it, no....people were... there were, I’d say they were more neighbourly then.277

What Joe missed most about the rural Ireland of his childhood was its close-knittedness and neighbourliness. Although Joe goes visiting friends in England, he ‘wouldn’t count it the same as Ireland’: walking into a house here uninvited would be regarded as an invasion of privacy. As Joe acknowledges, however, present-day Ireland, where the people lock their doors, is very different from the nostalgicized Ireland of his memories:

I never seen a television in my life in Ireland, at that time, nobody had them, simple as that...little bush radio...we used to listen to the football on that on a Sunday...and our house, it was a house that you’d call a (?) house like, and all the neighbours would be in, the house would be packed on a Sunday, football match...the house would be packed, so it would, surely, but erm....it was.....it was the best of the two....to bring up kids, now I realise that....at that time, now I’m not saying now, things are a little bit different, a little bit different now alright, but at that time, you could go out, you felt safe...kids are not safe there now, there not safe here, well you know about that yourself...kids are not safe here either...it’s changed in a lot of ways, I mean there was things...there was things that happened at that time...that we never knew about....as children, I mean, there was abuse there with Priests and all that goin’ at that time, we, I know that now, I didn’t know it then, [getting quieter] I didn’t know it then like, I didn’t know it then like you know, but..... I know it now... there’s.... two people I always admire, because they, they brought, first of all the government, right, one man that I admire there, I know he done wrong, was Charlie Haughey, but when he got caught, it brought the government into the spotlight, now they’re watching them all, as you know, when you listen to the news and everything that’s gone on with Bertie.. Ahern, and all that, Charley Haughey... there was nothing ever before that happened that I knew of... Haughey fiddled the country and he fiddled his, everybody, right, left and centre. Alright, it’s not right to talk about the man, he’s dead and gone, but eh, that was part of it like, Haughey brought that to light, the other man then, that brought the priests issue out, I don’t know whether you’ll remember him, well you will remember him, of course you’ll remember him, was Bishop Casey...278

Like Britain, southern Ireland has been subject to increasingly rapid economic and cultural change in the second half of the twentieth century. As well as rising affluence and the
increasing commodification of culture, sex and corruption scandals involving political and religious elites have undermined the legitimacy of traditional sources of authority and punctured national myths about Irish moral superiority. Viewed from the standpoint of a post-war migrant settled in England, such transformations have de-stabilised the pure, innocent Ireland of Joe’s remembered past, signalling his cultural distancing from the present Ireland. When Joe designates Ireland ‘home’, it is this lost Ireland, idealised now in memory, which gives ‘there’ meaning as a site of belonging.

Crucially, like the narrative of Irish exclusion in Britain, the trope of ‘Irish muscle’ or the figure of the self-made man, this story of the loss of an idyllic past is shaped and sustained within the particular public of the Irish community in Britain. In Manchester, for example, community members have sought to reproduce this idealised place through their aestheticisation of the interior spaces of the local Irish centre, adorning its walls with images of untouched rural tranquillity and constructing a life size installation of a thatched cottage in the main hall. As such, since the idealised vision of ‘Ireland’ invoked when Joe speaks of ‘home’ derives much of its meaning from the present context in which it is embedded, namely the particular public of the Irish community, it follows that Joe is actually expressing an identification with ‘the Irish round here’ as much as with the ‘real’ Ireland of today:

I always like to be involved in the Irish round here as well, and all that you know, I am the treasurer of Irish Community Care here as well, so I am so..it keeps me..very occupied at the moment like, so it does, it keeps me very, very occupied at the moment so it does

Since Joe, who lives within walking distance of the local Irish centre, was forced into retirement ten years ago, he has become increasingly involved with the activities of the local Irish community. As he points out repeatedly in the interview, he regularly attends functions at the centre, has acted in stage plays, is a member of the Federation of Irish Societies, and, as he states here, sits on the managerial board of Irish Community Care, a local voluntary charity established in 1985 to cater to the special welfare needs of Irish people in the city. In one sense, highlighting his prominence within the local community represents a means by which Joe can secure a sense of status within the interview. In Bourdieu’s sense of the term,

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280 Joe Doherty, p. 2.
if the construction industry represents a ‘field’ in which Bill has been able to accumulate distinct forms of social and cultural capital, the Irish community may also be viewed as a field in which Joe has been able to achieve a different sort of social distinction.

In the broader context of Joe’s life in the last ten years, however, his increased participation in the activities of the local Irish community may also be seen as central to how he has come to terms with his deteriorating health and retirement, a process which in turn has shaped his sense of self in particular ways. If the Irish community represents a relational field, it is also a particular public which supplies a set of images in which Joe can invest to make sense of the events of his life. In this respect, his designation of Ireland as ‘still my home’ is psychically linked with his preferred narrative of work in England. In the same way that Joe’s idealisation of the material rewards of work in England enables him to see his life here as having been worthwhile, his idealisation of Ireland as ‘home’ represents a way of affirming the origins of the self, of securing its authentification during a period of instability in its development. This does not intimate a desire for return to Ireland, but on the contrary, is dependent upon the recognition of those origins by others who share a similar sense of the past. In short, in affirming where it came from, the self also affirms where it is now.

Conclusion: towards a ‘communal imaginary’ of the Irish in Britain

The status of the Irish as a pool of cheap, flexible labour within the nineteenth century British economy both troubled and pleased contemporaries. While the perception that Irish labourers undercut native workers within the labour market fed into popular anti-Irish hostilities, employers and the state could also recognise the value of the Irish in the context of rapid industrialisation. If the Report on the State of the Irish Poor of 1836 designated the Irish ‘a less civilised population’, it recognised too that:

We ought not … to overlook the advantage of the demand for labour in England and Scotland being amply and adequately supplied, and at a cheap rate and at very short notice, by Irish; it is to be remembered that these Irish have been, and are, most efficient workmen; and they came in the hour of need, and that they afforded the chief part of the animal strength by which the great works of our manufacturing districts have been executed.281

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Such ambivalence in relation to the Irish has strong echoes in the post-war period. Popular perceptions of Irish men continued to be informed by established stereotypes, yet in debates about the imposition of immigration controls in the 1950s and 60s the state would ultimately insist upon the shared history of British and Irish people, in large measure because of the value of ‘unskilled’, mobile Irish labour to the British economy during a period of intense reconstruction. In a real sense, particularly if one ignores the relative dispersal of the Irish within the post-war economy, Irish workers ‘were hard working, well paid slaves, exactly what Britain wanted to rebuild their devastated country’.

There are, however, limits to any such emphasis on continuity. Most obviously, the dynamics of economic reconstruction in an era of full employment and rising demand were very different from those shaping employment during industrialisation, a difference expressed, not only in the said dispersal of the Irish within the post-war labour market, but in the growing influence of the Irish within the construction industry, and more generally, in rising standards of living and rates of consumption amongst workers in most sectors. Nor, moreover, should assumptions be made regarding the meaning, both personal and collective, of Irish migrants’ experiences within the labour market based on the fact of their commodification by British and Irish governments or their ambivalent positioning within British popular culture. While such contexts could certainly condition migrants’ experiences, the oral histories, autobiographies and diaries examined in this chapter reveal a diverse and complex range of productive interactions with different aspects of the work process within the construction industry, archetypically the most exploitative of migrant occupations, giving rise to a range of competing conceptions of migrant identity and narratives of experience. These experiences and conceptions have in turn been taken up by various journalists, novelists, songwriters, community activists and amateur historians who, having generalised and re-shaped them in a variety of ways, have between them created a repository of different tropes and images of the Irish construction worker in Britain. The figure of ‘Paddy’ as a ‘hard-working, well-paid slave’ constitutes but one amongst a number of constructs within what might be termed an imaginary of the Irish construction worker in Britain:

Cultural imaginaries furnish public forms which both organise knowledge of the social world and give shape to phantasies within the apparently ‘internal’ domain of psychic life. By their means, knowledge becomes implicated in the handling of psychic anxieties and
conflicts while efforts towards subjective composure underpin and shape the acquisition of knowledges.282

This chapter investigated the distinct ways competing images of the construction worker were implicated in how my three respondents organised their experiences of work within the industry. This process was conditioned by the specificity of individuals’ experiences of work within the industry, by how the different locations they inhabited and work practices they were involved with engendered the internalisation of particular values, aspirations and aversions, and by how, in the present, subjects sought to form a coherent whole out of the different imagos in part formed through these processes via recourse to generalised images of the Irish construction worker available within the communal imaginary. The study of this dialectic between the accretion and sedimentation of past experience and the present needs of the self to achieve a measure of subjective composure has enabled a more complex theorisation of the construction industry as a site of self construction, where subjects’ conversations with various material and symbolic features are seen as constitutive of distinct, de-centred and historically shifting subjectivities.

As this suggests, as well as the work environment and the broader economic and cultural context of Irish labour migration in the post-war period, this chapter has sought to foreground the linked processes of the cultural circuit and subjective composure as dynamics wholly neglected in studies of Irish identities in Britain. As we have seen, one of the effects of the development of a circuit between personal experiences within the industry and the communal memory of the Irish in Britain is that generalised images of ‘Irish muscle’, the ‘self-made man’ and the ‘well-paid slave’ become available for public consumption. In different ways, Denis, Bill and Joe were able to use these images, not only to organise and make sense of their work experiences, but to construct a positive narrative about their past, to achieve a sense of recognition and status within interview. In this sense, the construction industry was the source of valued imagos, and the cultural circuit could reinforce the self’s positive identification with these imagos.

Yet, as the analysis also demonstrated, this was rarely a straightforward process. The cultural circuit provided images which enabled the projection of idealised selves, but these projections were frequently related to processes of splitting in which the processes of the

282 Dawson, Soldier Heroes, p. 48.
circuit were also implicated. In Denis’s case, for example, a relationship was discernible between his idealisation of the good Irish worker, the silencing of earlier desires for material advancement, and the public celebration of Irish success with the construction industry. In this instance, the cultural circuit could be seen to reinforce a process of muting, which was simultaneously a process of splitting. At a theoretical level, this might be taken to suggest that the phenomenon identified as muting is not simply an effect of discourse but also involves an interior process of splitting-off imagos, which itself will also involve a transformation of emotion and re/identification, rather than simply the loss, repression or silencing of a voice.

Finally, running through all these diverse negotiations were ongoing readings of ‘here’ in relation to ‘there’. Overlapping and intersecting with the multiple conversations subjects were engaged in within their narratives was a dynamic whereby they sought to make the place of settlement cohere with the place left behind. At the empirical level, this enables us to see the construction industry as a space, indeed a collection of spaces, in which diverse and doubled forms of belonging were shaped and re-shaped in complex ways. The construction industry could function as a space in which ties to the place left behind could be re-affirmed or eroded, but ‘here’ and ‘there’ were always engaged in interplay because both terms related to sets of imagos which the subject worked to bring into relation in order to compose itself.

At the theoretical level, this enables us to add on the one hand to the concept of composure, and on the other, to notions of doubleness and hybridity. Regarding the former, if the process of composure always involves ongoing negotiations between past and present, public and private, local and national, for the migrant self it involves too an overlapping negotiation between there and here. Regarding the latter, if the production of migrant memory always involves a dialogue between here and there, reading here in relation to there is also conditioned by the processes of composure, which is to say that a) the dialogue is always mediated and framed by available discourses which set limits on and affirm particular sorts of belonging b) the dialogue is underpinned by an attempt to psychically integrate the self, a process which can take a variety of forms c) the dialogue conditions and is conditioned by multiple other conversations, which is to say that the formation of
‘national’, ‘ethnic’ or ‘diasporic’ belongings are inextricably tied to the negotiations the self finds itself in within other arenas of identity construction.
Chapter Three

Ambivalent horizons: competing narratives of self in Irish women’s memories of pre-marriage years in England

Quests for un/certainty

In his haunting first novel *The Barracks*, the writer John McGahern undertook an intensive exploration of the complex emotional life of the book’s central character, Elizabeth Reegan. After working in London as a nurse during the war, Elizabeth has returned to the small rural Irish village of her childhood to marry Reegan, the local police sergeant. Confined now to the undeviating daily rhythms of the barracks, and to the roles of wife and mother within a marriage lacking the intimacy she had always craved, Elizabeth spends her days reflecting upon the events of her life. In this search for the meaning of her life, Elizabeth’s past in wartime London re-surfaces time and again, taking on different resonances at different moments. At one point, bored and simmering with frustration at Mrs Casey’s efforts to draw her into tedious conversation in the barracks day room, Elizabeth begins to remember that:

She used to love watching the young girls home from the city parade to Communion, especially at Easter, when many came; it used to excite her envy and curiosity, so much so that when she’d come home from Mass she’d always want to talk about them to Reegan; it gave her back the time when she too was one of them, but he’d never care to listen. Nothing, she knew, can exist in the social days of people without attention, her excitement would be gone before the breakfast was over.283

At another moment, after Elizabeth has found out she has cancer and is travelling with her husband into Dublin to have a life-threatening operation, the train journey into Westland Row throws her mind back to the years when the station had been the scene of youthful leave-takings:

How the lights of this city used to glow in the night when the little boat train taking her back to London after Christmas came in and out of the countryside and winter dark. The putting-on of overcoats and the taking of cases off the racks and the scramble across the platform to get on the train that went the last eight miles out to the boat. Always girls weeping, as she had wept the first time too, hard to know you cannot hide for ever in the womb and the home, you have to get out to face the world.284

Within the memories of John McGahern’s character the relation between family, emigration and the city has neither a fixed nor straightforward meaning. The city is neither a place of independence and self-realisation, nor of loneliness and personal desolation, but both these things, at different times, in relation to different situations. Within the searching memories of Elizabeth Reegan the city is a site of competing versions of self, evoking feelings of excitement and loss, reflecting both positive and negative comparisons with the confined but settled rural existence to which she is ultimately committed.

By contrast, historiographical representations of Irish women’s migration to Britain have been much more certain about the meaning of their experiences. On the one side, scholars stressing the robustness of an Irish ethnic identity in Britain have tended to emphasise the connection between Irish femininity and the familial sphere as a component of ‘unassimilated’ Irishness. For Marella Buckley, for example, the strength of Irish identity in Britain is closely tied to ‘the enduring ethnic affiliation of Irish women, their powerful role within the family, and their traditional responsibility for the rearing and socialisation of children’.285 More recently, Sharon Lambert has argued that in post-colonial Ireland ‘a woman’s perception of Irishness was increasingly associated with her role within the family and home’, encouraging the ‘continuance of Irish patriarchal culture after emigration’.286 In her study of Irish women in Lancashire, ‘Irish emigrant women were maintaining their Irish identities within their families’, offering a challenge to ‘the accepted notion of the assimilation of Irish women in twentieth century Britain’.287

284 McGahern, The Barracks, p.113.
In opposition to this story of continuity, other scholars of Irish women’s emigration in the twentieth century have stressed Irish woman’s desire to transcend the limitations of Irish patriarchal culture. For historians such as Ide O’Carroll, Caitriona Clear and Mary Daniels, ‘emigration was one of a number of strategies employed by Irish girls and women to better their lives’ rather than an involuntary flight. According to Daniels, women’s migration was ‘more than an escape from poverty’ since ‘they were in large part turning their backs on a ridged rural patriarchy’:

In many parts of Ireland the elderly bachelor farmer became an indicator that Irish women were choosing emigration – or, indeed, the socially derided single state – rather than any conditions of life on the land. Irish girls exploited the humble educational facilities available to them with considerable determination in order to prepare themselves for employment overseas, and having reached their destinations lost no time in creating the channels which would render emigration a major dimension in Irish life.

Following the lead given by John McGahern’s portrayal of Elizabeth Reegan’s mediations on her life, this chapter seeks to move away from such historiographical certainties, towards an exploration of the ambivalence of Irish women’s memories of migration to post-war England. Focusing on three migrant’s memories of the years between leaving for England and getting married, the chapter seeks to address the issue of Irish women’s experience of migration to post-war England in terms of the dialogics of subjectivity outlined in the general introduction. Promulgating an analysis in which emotion and processes of discursive mediation share centre stage, it explores how subjects’ negotiated a number of ‘modern’, familial, religious and metropolitan discourses on feminine selfhood during an interstitial moment between leaving one family and forming an other, between leaving behind one place and settling in another. Instead of attempting to determine the validity of either the continuity or discontinuity theses, the chapter suggests that the complexity of women’s negotiation of these competing constructs militates against the neat compression of feminine migrant experience into linear stories about the rejection or reproduction of patriarchy.

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Redemption story

Between 1926 and 1971, over 80,000 women emigrated from southern Ireland, the majority single and under 25. As is frequently pointed out, one of the ironies of this mass movement was that it occurred during a period when official discourses on Irish national identity were asserting the primacy of women’s domestic roles. For a number of writers, Ide O’Carroll being one, this apparent contradiction is explainable in terms of escape: ‘essential to the move was a desire to distance themselves from control by family and patriarchal society’. For Sharon Lambert, however, ‘the strength of the family ideal in Irish culture’ militated against ‘the complete rejection of family ties after emigration’. Rather, ‘the cultural climate of newly independent Ireland generally ensured that emigrants to England left with a desire to uphold their Irish identity’, and since ‘an Irish woman’s identity was defined by her role within the family she was less likely to sever family ties than to adopt strategies of maintaining them from a distance.’ The maintenance of familial ties after emigration was exemplified in the operations of familial networks, which enabled women to fulfil the role of the obedient Irish daughter in a number of ways. In women’s pre-marriage years this could take the form of the sending of remittances and letters, lengthy return visits, and looking after and supporting other emigrant relatives, including sick relatives already living in England. After marriage, however, ‘the lengthening of family ties’ was typically enacted via the transmission of an Irish cultural identity to children.

Certain aspects of this interpretation resonate with the pre-marriage narrative of my first respondent, Brenda, whom we met in chapter one. Born in 1927 in Co. Galway, the third-born in a family of six siblings, Brenda emphasised a ‘happy’ if frugal childhood growing-up on her family’s small farm. Indeed, so content was Brenda with her life in rural Galway that she harboured a desire to emulate her mother and marry on the land. This, however, was not to be, as Brenda’s older sister was to receive the family dowry, enabling her to ‘go into a farmhouse’ rather than Brenda. As such, Brenda ‘had to go out to work’, but since local

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290 See appendix 1, table (ii)
work was scarce and badly remunerated, in July 1946, aged 19, she migrated to Lymm in order to take up work in domestic service as part of a government recruitment scheme.\textsuperscript{295}

As we noted in chapter one, Brenda’s account of this process had a number of distinctive features. Even though Brenda affirmed that she ‘wanted to go’ to England, the reasons she gave for wanting to go constantly referred back to the needs and desires of familial others, while her narrative of leaving itself exuded signs of unhappiness and alienation. This was vividly on display in Brenda’s recollections of the day of leaving, in which she recalled the embarkation procedures she experienced in Dublin the day before boarding for Holyhead:

\begin{quote}
Barry: What sticks out in your mind about that, that day?
Brenda: Well erm...there again, I was just 19 and erm..came to Athenry, the Fields of Athenry [laughs] I came to the....(wispering) to that station with my father and my mother and that was quite sad to say goodbye to them ...(pause as Brenda wipes tears from her eyes and gathers herself)...and I was met at Dublin, by some person, a man, and...there was a lot of other girls from different parts of Ireland but I didn’t know any of them and a special hotel we stayed in..and we had to have a medical..and if you were dirty or had lice or anything like that, you had to go for a bath and your clothes would be fumigated....and all that..before....and in the morning, we went to the boat and I was met in Holyhead, by erm..the people I was going to work for...because they were in Wales at the time because it was the week of the 12\textsuperscript{th} July, my brother was home from erm..Belfast, he was living there then, and he was quite upset about me coming as well, yeah...\textsuperscript{296}
\end{quote}

One way of explaining the emotions evoked in this narrative concerns a conflict between the economic imperatives of the stem family economy as they connect with the prescriptions of official conceptions of Irish femininity during this period. On the one hand, such prescriptions define self-fulfilment for women in terms of marriage and motherhood and a life within the domestic sphere of the rural homestead. On the other, the inheritance practices built into the small farm economy entail that non-inheriting sons and undowried daughters will need at some point to emigrate in order to ensure the family’s continuity on the land. For Brenda this creates a conflict between a desire to stay within the family and a desire, as an obedient daughter, to help preserve it through leaving it. The sense of loss that ultimately results from this conflict is never verbalised directly, but emerges through

\textsuperscript{295} Brenda Grady, pp. 1-4.
\textsuperscript{296} Brenda Grady, p. 5.
Brenda’s depiction of the spaces through which the lived experience of leaving takes place. In 1943, following an outbreak of typhus in the west of Ireland, the British and Irish authorities had established temporary embarkation regulations requiring boat passengers travelling from Ireland to England to be disinfected in Dublin prior to boarding. Controversial at the time due to the de-humanising way migrants were treated through procedures such as hosing-down, for Brenda the remembered details of the process symbolise personal dissolution, as she leaves behind the family-centred world of childhood for the alien and impersonal milieu of the ‘exile’.

This trope of exile, a prominent feature of Irish public discourses on emigration in the 1940s, continues to frame Brenda’s account as she narrates her early experiences of arrival and settlement:

**Barry:** What were your expectations whenever you were coming over to Holy head, what did you, what were you expecting?

**Brenda:** Well I was a bit disappointed because really erm, it was Wales, came to for a few weeks because the children, that we came over here to look after, they were children, they was up erm.. here during the war, erm..and they were going to Grammar school and all that, this special Matron was looking after them, they were in Wales on holidays….and they were telling me how lovely Wales was and stopping every so often looking at this, that and the other and well, I just said I’d left a place more beautiful than that, which I did, I was a bit disappointed.

Most of the respondents in this sample migrated directly to large British cities such as London, Birmingham or Manchester, and as such their memories of arrival frequently recall contrasts between the urban and the rural, the traditional and the modern. By contrast, because Brenda migrated as part of a centrally organised recruitment scheme in the years immediately following the war, she was liable to be directed where female labour was then most in demand. In her case, before actually taking up residence in Lymm, this involved a period in rural Wales, where the children of the family she was going to work for were then holidaying. Rural Wales, however, did not evoke the familiar in Brenda’s memories. Although stopping to look at the Welsh scenery provoked backwards-glancing at the place

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298 Brenda Grady, p. 5.
left, this only served to confirm Brenda’s ‘disappointment’: ‘I’d left a place more beautiful than that’.

Such memories evoke Brenda’s continuing emotional ties with the place she has had to leave, but, at certain points, they also hint at other dissatisfactions linked to the context of arrival. A little further on I try to elicit Brenda’s memories of ‘English people’ and how easy it was to ‘settle’:

Barry: So what about the English people? What were your first impressions of them?
Brenda: They were alright, I never..I never..got anything to say about them?
Barry: Never nothing to say?
Brenda: No, no, no [pause]
Barry: Was it easy to settle, when you first arrived?
Brenda: Even when….well it was a case of settling, you couldn’t go back for a year [laughs]
Barry: So you had to?
Brenda: Well, you had to, you had to…

As Brenda reticently states, ‘settling’ was not the issue. Although Brenda may have ‘wanted’ to go to England in order to help her family’s economic situation, she ultimately had very limited control over the decision to leave or the migration process itself. Where Brenda migrated to, who she worked for, and the work she actually performed was largely determined by the recruitment needs of the state. And, whether she liked where she was sent or not, she ‘had to’ stay: if she broke her contract she was obliged to pay back her travel costs, which the state had funded in order to facilitate rapid labour movement during wartime and immediately after.

The muted character of Brenda’s responses to my questions insinuates that, in fact, she retained no special fondness for the place she was sent to. As she reveals a little further on, her employers were ‘quite strict’:

The people where I worked in then were quite strict and hard work as well, you know, they’d expect you to wash the walls the down and in fact there was a lady who was

299 Brenda Grady, p. 5.
supposed to come in to do the cleaning and that and then this little group of Irish girls came, the cleaners was let off and we had to do it.\textsuperscript{300}

As in Ireland, domestic service went into steep decline in Britain in the decades after 1945. The census shows that the numbers employed in the sector declined from 2 million in 1931 to 750,000 in 1951, falling further to 200,000 in 1961.\textsuperscript{301} This decline was in large part due to the unattractive nature of the work relative to the new employment opportunities opening for young women within the labour market during the period. As well as being poorly remunerated and characteristically arduous, living-in was frequently associated with a loss of personal freedoms since employers, if they were particularly ‘strict’, could monitor and regulate the behaviour of servants due to the way the overlapping of places of work and residence confused servants’ status as employees and members of the household. Young women such as Brenda were thus being recruited to fill vacancies in a sector which British women were evacuating as alternative possibilities opened in the post-war labour market, this being a period when the labour demands associated with reconstruction necessitated the continued use of high levels of female labour within the British economy.

Brenda’s references to these aspects of her first job in Britain indicate that, like the process of leaving Ireland, this phase in the migration process was experienced as something one ‘had to’ endure. The trope of ‘exile’ which informs Brenda’s reconstruction of leaving here comes to include a story about labour market exploitation in the receiving country, suggesting the structuring effects of communal narratives about the ‘enslavement’ of Irish labour within the post-war British economy. However, the arc of descent delineated through these memories did have a turning point in Brenda’s pre-marriage narrative. Following her muted response to questions asking about her first job, I asked about what was important in eventually aiding her settlement in England, at which point the action switched to Manchester:

\textsuperscript{300} Brenda Grady, p. 6.
Barry: What was important to you in helping you settle?

Brenda: [pause] Well er...when I came into Manchester, and then from Lymm, when I came back from Ireland after the first year, when I went over to Ireland for a holiday, because I’d stay here where we were and with some of the girls from the village as well that were with me...and we came into Manchester ... and we first came into Manchester because there are places to go, socialising and all that, and erm...I worked for a very nice Jewish woman that was a medical herbalist...and she was very good, she had no family of her own, and was a receptionist and I used to live in digs but with her living on her own and I wasn’t keen on my digs I lived in with her, there was a girl coming in every day to do the cleaning and that and it was quite a nice place...so...I was quite happy in Manchester...and that was where I met my husband, here in Manchester...

Following the completion of her one year contract as a domestic servant in Lymm, Brenda returned home to Ireland for a holiday in July 1947. Thereafter, instead of returning to Lymm, Brenda moved into nearby Manchester, where she initially took up residence in ‘digs’ run by a private landlady. While living here, one of her friends alerted her to the possibility of work at the home of a medical herbalist based in Cheetham Hill, then an impoverished working-class district on the northern boundary of the inner-city. Soon after taking up employment as a receptionist at the herbalists’, run by ‘a very nice Jewish woman’ with ‘no family of her own’, Brenda moved in to her new place of work, having not been ‘keen’ on the digs where she was then staying. This move marked a shift in the tone of Brenda’s narrative, from stoic resolve to endure her situation at Lymm, to relative happiness: ‘it was quite a nice place...so...I was quite happy in Manchester’.

This shift appears to be linked to various aspects of her new conditions of employment at her new place of work and residence. In contrast to her depiction of her experiences of leaving, her living-in job at Lymm, and her first digs in Manchester, the language Brenda uses to describe her new working environment and her new employer suggests a much stronger emotional relationship with this place. Indeed, where Brenda’s earlier narratives emphasised the impersonal character of the environments she was passing through, her recollection that the ‘very nice Jewish woman’ she worked for ‘had no family of her own’ intimates that she saw herself as a surrogate daughter to her childless employer and her new situation at the herbalists more generally as reproducing the familial dynamics she had been used to at home in Ireland. In addition, Brenda also preferred her new job at the herbalists.

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302 Brenda Grady, p. 6.
Where Brenda’s work as a domestic had been arduous, exploitative and low-status, working as a receptionist marked a step upwards on the employment ladder, distinguishing her from the ‘girl coming in every day to do the cleaning’.

However, as well as liking her new place of employment and residence, the tonal shift discernable in this phase of Brenda’s narrative was also related to new possibilities for ‘socialising’, and as we shall see, to meeting her husband. Although Brenda had Irish girl friends when working as a domestic in Lymm, and although they had often travelled together into nearby Warrington and Altrincham for nights out, Manchester offered much greater opportunities for dancing:

Barry: Where did yous go?
Brenda: Well we used to go dancin’, there was dances here, or there used to be erm..some parochial halls attached to the church and then they was a lot down near the university and around that area there was piles and piles of Irish dance halls, where you are at the moment, yeah
Barry: And was there much drinking that went on?
Brenda: Erm yes, the drinking used to go on and the fighting used to go on as well..
Barry: [laughs] and did you see any fights yourself?
Brenda: No, no, I didn’t, I didn’t see..becuase we weren’t allowed to be out late so we had to be in at 11 or half-eleven and erm..we didn’t see a lot of it, no

As Alan Kidd has noted, one of the reasons for the relative buoyancy of Manchester’s economy during the 1930s-1950s was the existence of a large and developing manufacturing sector which cushioned the effects of accelerating de-industrialisation. A corollary of this growth in ‘light industry’ and other areas such as retail and clerical work, was the advent of the young, single wage-earner within the local economy, an event which heralded the emergence of a youth-based commercial leisure culture within the city. As Claire Langhamer notes, dancing vied with cinema-going as a popular leisure pursuit for young wage-earners in the city during the inter-war period and increased in popularity in the post-

304 Brenda Grady, p. 7.
war years. The most popular venues for dancing were the large public dance halls, such as the Ritz and the Plaza, situated in the city centre, but other venues also existed which ‘catered for women of different social backgrounds’. As well as Sunday-school socials, works dances and an array of privates dances, Langhamer notes the existence of Gaelic League dance halls, whose Ceilidhs were popular with local Catholic youths of Irish parentage.

In the post-war period the rising number of British dance venues would be augmented by a growth in various kinds of Irish dance venue in major centres of Irish migration, and in Manchester these spaces provided Brenda with opportunities for ‘socialising’ with other Irish people in a new country. As such, Brenda’s use of such spaces represented participation in a form of commercial leisure that simultaneously formed part of a migrant ‘culture of adjustment’. But such spaces were also part of a pre-established Catholic culture in Manchester, designed to preserve the faith of Manchester-born working and lower middle class Catholics. As Irish migration to Britain began to rise during the 1940s, clerics and Catholic social workers in both Britain and Ireland repeatedly advised young migrants to spend their leisure time in these spaces as a form of religious and national duty, while warning them against the myriad dangers encountered in disreputable British dancehalls and other British leisure venues. In ‘An Open Letter to Irish Girls about to Emigrate’ published in 1949, Olive Mary Garrigan, Wartime Welfare Adviser at the London Rest Centre, outlined a comprehensive list of potential pitfalls facing ‘young Irish girls’ arriving in England at a time of ‘much moral unrest as well as resentment at the restraints of society’. One of the most serious, according to Garrigan, was ‘loneliness’ because:

…if you are lonely you are likely to accept any companionship rather than none – and that way trouble lies. Oh, and don’t think because there is a dancehall in the town that it is the very thing for you. There are dancehalls, and dancehalls – some of them no girl of good character would be seen entering – so try to get the advice to those able to judge of the matter.

311 Garrigan, “So You Are Going to England”’, p. 53.
Such advice, and indeed leisure itself, should be sought within one’s local parish:

The socials and dances run by the Parish Church to which you come will give you recreation. Do attend them. You are perhaps a child of Mary in Ireland. Bring your medal and office book with you. The Sodality in your English parish will welcome you as a friend. Do not be shy! If you have been a member of the Legion of Mary, continue the good work you have been doing in Ireland by joining the Praesidium over here. You can do great work for the Catholic Religion in England. I should mention too that there may be a suitable Irish Club in your new district. If so, do join it. The sound of your native accents is most comforting when you are feeling a long way from home I do assure you.  

Occurring at a time when sections of British public opinion were similarly apprehensive about the impact of wartime upheaval upon British morality, rising Irish migration to Britain during the 1940s and 50s intensified longstanding clerical concerns about the secularising effects of British culture upon vulnerable young Irish ‘boys and girls’, inciting the consolidation and extension of a regulatory discourse aimed at keeping migrants within the fold of the church in Britain. Involving the activities of parish priests and Catholic welfare workers, lay groups such as the Legion of Mary and the Young Christian Workers, the discourse emphasised the dangers of life in a materialistic urban culture, but also instructed migrants on how to achieve a distinctive version of migration success. In the case of female migrants, whom observers viewed as especially vulnerable to modern corruptions, anxieties accumulated around issues of sex and marriage. Cautionary stories in welfare reports and prescriptive tracts warned of the dangers of pre-marital sex, contraception, flirtations with ‘non-Catholics’ and miscegenation, and marriage in a registry office. The good female emigrant would exercise vigilance at all times in relation to such dangers, while ensuring she maintained her religious observances and practices. As Garrigan stressed, crucial in this respect was securing ‘suitable’ employment:

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312 Garrigan, ‘“So You Are Going to England”’, p. 53.
Many Irish girls, indeed, I believe most, are coming here either to be trained as nurses or to undertake domestic work, and there is very great need of them. Particularly are girls welcomed in homes where there are young children, and they will be doing a great work of Christian service by helping mothers of families. But care must be taken in deciding on a first place...Before finally agreeing to take a position it is wise to make sure that the prospective employer appreciates the necessity of allowing you to be free to attend mass regularly; this will save you embarrassment and difficulty after you arrive, and it will be understood as a condition of your employment.314

The image of the ‘good girl emigrant’ constructed through such advice informs Brenda’s narrative of her pre-marriage experiences in a variety of ways. In Brenda’s recollection of going dancing above, for example, she initially affirms that drinking and fighting used to take place amongst the men on nights out on Oxford road. Immediately following this, however, she denies having actually ‘saw’ such practices take place, emphasising that ‘we had to be in by eleven’, thereby securing the moral solvency of the collective ‘we’ and her employer. A similar emphasis on her employer’s reputability re-emerges a little further on when I ask specifically about religion:

Barry: So erm...what about religion, was church important whenever you first came here?
Brenda: It was and like we were working then and I think some of them were Catholics that married out and that because, was quite like (?) their family erm.. made sure that they went to church, cos’ we wanted to, and where I worked for the herbalist, the church was only a few yards away down the road, St Chads and erm...there was no...it was important to us and it was important to the people we worked for that we did go...to church

Barry: Was there a lot of Irish people in that church?
Brenda: The church was full to the door with Irish people....

Although it proved impossible to decipher a key phrase at the beginning of this narrative, in this response Brenda seems to be suggesting that some Catholics ‘married out’ because the families they worked for did not cater to their religious needs. By contrast, attending church was ‘important’ both to Brenda and the woman she lived with in Cheetamhill, while her local church, ‘full to the door with Irish people’, was only ‘a few yards away down the road’.

314 Garrigan, ‘“So You Are Going to England” ’, pp. 50-51.
The pre-figured end-point of this story is that, having maintained her religious duties, Brenda ultimately ‘married in’. The figure of ‘the good girl emigrant’ constructed through prescriptive literature attends church regularly and frequents Irish Catholic dancehalls because these are the spaces in which she will meet a suitable future husband. Catholic discourse did not counsel emigrants to return to Ireland at the earliest opportunity, but viewed marriage and the creation of a family within the Catholic church as ultimately the most effective way of safeguarding migrants spiritual welfare in England. A ‘confidential’ 1948 ‘Report on Irish Workers in London’, produced by a London parish priest’s committee, argued for the creation of a new London Irish centre staffed by priests on the grounds that ‘they [migrants] are very anxious to be among their own sort, who understand them. After marriage they more easily fit into ordinary parish life, especially if there are children’.  

Advice manuals and prescriptive letters in Catholic journals thus presented Catholic marriage and family as the ultimate goals of settlement in England. A 1953 tract by The Catholic Truth Society explained that:

In Ireland, it is the accepted thing to look on marriage as a gift from God. In England, this gift is constantly degraded on the radio and in films, newspapers and daily conversation. The Catholics in England must therefore be very careful in choosing a partner or accepting an offer of marriage. The boy should not think simply of good looks or appearance or charm; he will, if he wants to be happy, judge which girl will make the best wife and mother. The girl should not be swept off her feet by glamour or ready money or sweet words; she will want a good husband and father who will be hardworking and faithful. Each will want to marry not only a Catholic but a good Catholic…

Although Catholic discourse lamented the post-war Irish ‘flight from the land’ and constantly denigrated English culture, it nevertheless encouraged migrants to settle in England, so long as they married ‘a good Catholic’. And although such discourse repeatedly stressed the differences between English and Irish attitudes to marriage and family, the breadwinner model it prescribed the natural Catholic family echoed post-war British discourses on femininity. As Penny Summerfield has noted, while contemporary sociologists claimed to have detected a new tendency towards companionate relations within marriage in Britain, and although post-war labour demands necessitated the

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continued use of female labour within the economy, politicians, psychologists and the
architects of the welfare state all continued to affirm the importance of ‘the housewife’ and
stay-at-home mother within contemporary imaginings of the British social order. In this
respect, Catholic discourses on femininity complemented rather than contradicted post-war
British anxieties about ‘moral vice’ and defensive idealisations of cosy domesticity.

For Brenda, such an ideal is central to her ability to compose a positive memory of her pre-
marriage experiences in England:

**Barry:** Tell me about your husband?
**Brenda:** Yes, I met my husband here in Manchester soon after I came over, because I was
very friendly with his sister, she was one of the ladies that was, am, used to come
were we were living in the digs, end eh, met him here and, eh, we were married
within two years, I met him at a dance, he came from the midlands, Abbeyleix,
not far from eh...what do you call it now em, Marlborough it was, Portlaoise,
that’s were he came from, now he was a man that was reared outside the town, he
knew the difference between rich and poor, he was a very very good worker, and
we were quite...we had our ups and downs like everybody does but just soon
after retiring he had a massive brain haemorrhage and died overnight, eh, our life
was alright and, em, we reared our children and we worked hard and so did I, and
am, of course I had to stay off during the years that my children were young, but
everyone of them passed the eleven plus...and everyone of them university...

Brenda’s reconstruction of her pre-marriage years in England is ordered according to the arc
of a redemption story. Brenda’s account of leaving manifests signs of loneliness and loss
which continue to permeate her narrative of her first year in Lymm. On moving to
Manchester, however, these emotions are replaced by expressions of happiness and a more
purposeful style of narration. This tonal shift was not only related to her new circumstances
of employment or greater opportunities for dancing, but to the way these things were
associated in her memory with meeting her husband. Arrival in Manchester coincided with
the beginning of a two year courtship, leading to the successful realisation of the prescribed
ideals of marriage and family. Because of this success Brenda is ultimately able to reflect
upon her pre-marriage years in a positive light, a process which may have been enhanced in

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60-66.

318 Brenda Grady, p. 9.
the wake of her husband’s death. Those first memories of her husband, stimulated by the interview process, may now feel more special because of his absence in the present.

Does this evidence a lengthening of familial ties? From one perspective, the answer to this appears to be yes. As we have seen here and in chapter one, the sense of loss which permeates Brenda’s narratives of leaving and arrival related to her exclusion from the happy family space she had grown up in and the fact that she would not be able to stay on the land. In an important respect, the turning point in Brenda’s pre-marriage narrative in England represents a point of redemption in that meeting her husband in Manchester and starting her own family enables her to redeem something of what has been lost through leaving. Settling in England becomes an alternative means of embodying the version of femininity represented in the figure of her mother. On the other hand, is the version of femininity embodied actually continuous with ‘traditional’ or official Catholic Irish femininity? The role that Catholic discourses on the emigrant plays in shaping Brenda’s experience, together with how it overlaps with contemporary British constructions, confuses the notion of continuity. When one takes into account the fact that Brenda’s work history appears to have followed the bi-modal pattern that became prevalent in post-1945 Britain, along with Brenda’s emphasis on her children’s educational success, the version of femininity projected through her narrative appears to evidence signs of hybridisation.

In addition, the turning point just described as a point of redemption was also a point of closure:

I thought I would return to Ireland but eh, I never did. I returned for holidays every year, but em, and I was courting a person, a lad over there, and ah, if you got married over there, and eh, in them days you had to have money to go into another farm house, and this boy was very nice, and we liked each other, but eh, his brother’s and sister’s are having three hundred pounds, anyway, my late husband who died a few years ago from a brain haemorrhage, met him as soon as we moved into Manchester so, we never bothered, we’d always go on holidays with the children and that but, that was the end of Ireland for me. 319

When Brenda first moved to England she continued to write to her mother, send home remittances and return to the family farm for holidays. During the early part of this period it

319 Brenda Grady, p. 4.
seems that Brenda still held out hope of returning to live in Ireland. Once she met her husband, however, her aspirations changed: ‘that was the end of Ireland for me’. Although Brenda and her husband would return on holidays with their children, a practice suggesting the lengthening of ties, the emotional focus of her life was now in Manchester, suggesting a re-working of belongings. Instead of continuity or discontinuity, Brenda’s narrative materialises a sense of self constructed and re-worked in relation to here and there simultaneously.

**Opportunity, self-expression and the return of the past**

Within the overall context of Brenda’s narrative of settlement, the significance of the three years between coming to Lymm and getting married lay in its relation to meeting her husband. These years represent a prelude to the more important events of marriage and family, and as such, although Brenda’s account includes stories about work and leisure, these themes are ultimately secondary in importance. Yet the labour market that young female migrants were entering in the decades after the war was changing in important ways as regards women’s employment. Despite the British state’s official endorsement of the traditional breadwinner family model, continuing labour shortages necessitated women’s increased participation in the labour market, particularly in areas such as nursing, teaching and the civil service.\(^{320}\) Such conditions opened new opportunities for Irish women: ‘although continuing to leave for lower-status employment, women from Ireland were increasingly represented across the spectrum of higher-status jobs opening to women in post-war Britain’.\(^{321}\) According to the 1951 census, although over 30% of Irish-born working women in England and Wales continued to work in ‘personal service’, over 60% were spread across 20 different categories of employment. Most strikingly, over 5% were employed in ‘commerce’, 9% in clerical work, and over 22% in ‘professions’, which included teaching, the civil service, midwifery, and in particular nursing.\(^ {322}\)

In Ireland, the idea of a connection between mass female emigration and new opportunities for self advancement within the sphere of work disrupted official constructions of

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domesticated Irish femininity, reinforcing the conservative problematisation of female emigration that continued right up until the 1960s. Yet, amongst certain political elites and a growing body of professional ‘experts’, a modernising discourse was also beginning to emerge in opposition to the ‘traditional’ vision of Irish modernity formulated within cultural nationalism. Tentatively, this discourse began to acknowledge female emigration in a different way. Although the majority report of the Commission on Emigration, published in 1954, surmised that ‘marriage opportunities’ rather than ‘the purely economic cause’ was an ‘influence of some significance’ on high levels of female emigration, it was prepared to recognise ‘improvement of personal status’ as well as ‘higher wages and better conditions of employment’ as important additional factors.\(^{323}\) Less cautiously and in the same year, the Liberal writer and critic Sean O’Faolain included women in his narrative of the emigrant as the incarnation of a new spirit of independence and ambition amongst young people dissatisfied with the regressiveness of Irish culture. According to O’Faolain, who viewed low Irish marriage rates, ‘rural depopulation’ and emigration as evidence of the increasingly ‘modern’ aspirations of Irish people:

All our young people are developing a proper concept of what constitutes decent living conditions, and until they get them, they are on strike against marriage. We are rearing generations in Ireland that have ten times more pride and ambition than their parents ever had, and good luck to them for it. As one young woman put it to me in two sentences: ‘I saw what my mother went through. Not for me, thank you!’\(^{324}\)

These tropes of ambition and self-improvement resonated with popular British representations of increased demand for female labour during wartime and after as signalling new ‘opportunities’ for feminine self-fulfilment. During the war commentators such as Mass Observation and the Labour MP Edith Summerskill claimed that, having ‘tasted the joys of economic independence in the factories and the services’, women would not be content to return to domesticity once the war had ended.\(^{325}\) While this language of ‘economic independence’ became much less visible in post-war discourses on women’s work, popular fiction and girls magazines, targeted in particular at young educated working

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women, continued to circulate narratives of feminine identity which presented success in the workplace and the notion of a ‘career’ as ideals of feminine self-fulfilment, albeit in ways that left traditional ideals based on marriage and motherhood intact. Popular culture in post-war Britain evidenced competing discourses of ‘marginality’ and ‘opportunity’ in relation to women’s role within the workforce. Where the former reasserted women’s traditional role within the family and home, the latter, according to Summerfield, ‘afforded the able and hard working woman from any social location an identity as a skilled and qualified member of a range of ‘feminine’ trades and professions’. 326

But the trope of ‘opportunity’ in relation to female migration did not refer exclusively to issues of work; the post-war British city also potentially provided new possibilities for self-development and the performance of alternative identities. Such ‘opportunities’ were premised not only on having more money, but on greater freedom of movement, less pervasive parental supervision, and on enhanced access to spaces of leisure and social interaction, most obviously pubs, cinemas and dancehalls. Rising wages, full employment, technological advance and the institutionalisation of the welfare state fostered the development of an increasingly consumer-driven culture in British urban centres, one effect of which was the increased public availability of relatively ‘permissive’ and assertive images of femininity. Although recent cultural histories have complicated pre-existing stories about post-war sexual liberation, these decades did witness a reshaping of the meaning of sex as part of the production and consumption of new forms of sexual knowledge. Related to the proclamations of professional experts opposed to what they perceived as British sexual repressiveness, and the increased use of sex as a selling tool by advertisers and the popular media, such knowledges popularised images of young, assertive and glamorous femininity, ‘socially mobile young women who appeared able to cross the city’s social boundaries, and drew on the resources of the sex industry as a form of empowerment’. 327

As they did the conservative British establishment, such images greatly perturbed Catholic commentators on the behaviour of Irish female emigrants in British urban centres.

326 Summerfield, Reconstructing, pp. 202-205.
Throughout the period clerics and social workers, and indeed a range of other Irish public figures, constantly denigrated the moral bankruptcy of British culture while warning young Irish women of the dangers they would encounter everywhere in the British city. During the 1940s and 1950s such representations powerfully structured Irish public understandings of the conditions emigrants encountered in British cities, but since the 1960s, occurring as part of larger shifts within Irish cultural memory of ‘nationalist Ireland’, a number of fictional and autobiographical accounts have entered the ‘cultural circuit’ which have accented themes of assertiveness and sexual exploration in relation to feminine migrant experience. In Britain, these constructions, most of which focus on post-war London, have fed into the developing communal imaginary of the Irish in Britain, supplying a powerful counter-image to representations of obedient femininity as well as the figure of the subjugated Irish wife.

Although primarily an epic tale about Irish masculine achievement within the post-war British construction industry, John B. Keane’s novel *The Contractors* engages in its portrayal of female characters with the idea of 1950s London as a space of self-construction and experimentation for young Irish women. In chapter two, for example, we are introduced to Margo Cullagan, a nurse in Newsham General Hospital originally from Wexford, who ‘had no particular ambition beyond being a staff nurse’ and who ‘enjoyed life where possible’. Margo, we are told:

…could not get out of Ireland quickly enough, out of the ‘sexless morass’ as she called it, out of the ‘dreary strictures of nunneries’…She wanted escape from the unnatural physical restrictions as she had so often confided to her best friend in the convent. She was forever delighting and shocking this fascinated listener with threats and promises of what she would do as soon as she established herself in England.\(^{328}\)

True to her word, once ‘established’ Margo uses her new-found freedom to explore her sexuality with a number of men. In our second encounter with Margo in the same chapter she is envisioned in ‘the Colorado Hotel’, ‘sat in the dim light of the residents’ lounge with a glass of gin in her hand’. Her other hand is ‘entwined around’ that of a new intern doctor, Angus McLernon from Alloway, who has just made a proposal:

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‘I’ve never gone to bed with anyone before’. She sounded aggrieved.
‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘I didn’t mean to offend you.’
‘You didn’t. You said what was on your mind and I like a person for that. I suppose you’re a Protestant?’
‘Yes. A Presbyterian.’
Margo smiled to herself. She had never gone to bed with a Presbyterian.
‘Why don’t you ask the night porter if he has a double room with a bath?’ The question caught him by surprise.329

Although Margo initially presents to Angus an image of feminine innocence, the interaction, which she controls, is ultimately as much a vehicle for the satisfaction of her desires as it is for Angus’s. These, moreover, extend beyond the purely sexual: Margo’s pleasure derives from her self-conscious manipulation of competing versions of femininity and the power this affords her, and from the prospect that sleeping with Angus, who is a Presbyterian, will enable her to perform a double transgression. It also has to do with Angus’s status, socially and economically, as a doctor: the phrase ‘a double room with a bath’ is suggestive of the ways in which Irish feminine ‘ambitions’ in post-war Britain could involve an interplay between issues of mobility and affluence simultaneously with those of romance and sexual experimentation.

Post-war discourses of feminine ‘opportunity’ supplied a discursive framework within which Clare, my second respondent, reconstructs her experiences of pre-marriage years in 1950s London. Clare, whom we met in the last chapter, was born in 1940 and grew up in rural North Cork, the youngest daughter in a family of four children. Clare’s memories of growing up in North Cork were ambivalent. Although she reflected nostalgically on the quaint, other-worldliness of the rural villages she knew as a child, her home-life was not a happy one due to the unpredictable and often violent moods of her father, who was a guard in the Garda Siochana (Civic Guards). Alongside memories which articulated a desire to achieve, like her older sisters, academic success, Clare also told stories in which such desires were persistently thwarted by the inefficiency of local institutions and the stifling prescriptions of authoritative others. Indeed, as one such story relates, it was the desire to escape her father’s control, to ‘see something else’, which ultimately confirmed Clare’s resolve to leave:

My father wouldn’t allow me to go anywhere. This was one of the reasons I left home really. I can really say I didn’t leave to find a job. I just wanted to get away, and wanted to get away from him. And I wanted to see the bright lights of London. I thought it was so… you know… just so… I just wanted to do rid of it, to get away, to see something else, you know… travel… so, I never really looked for a job.330

Aged seventeen, Clare left for ‘the bright lights of London’ in the summer of 1957, travelling by Rosslare to Fishgaurd along with her older sister. Clare’s sister, who was returning from holidays, was ‘a qualified nurse’ in London, and having recently moved into ‘her own flat’, was able to provide Clare with an immediate source of accommodation. ‘Within a week’ Clare, who had undertaken secretarial training in Ireland after leaving school, had found a job in Lloyds bank because ‘t’was very easy to get work then, you know. You could pick and choose’.331

Work, however, was not the central focus of this part of Clare’s narrative. Within a year of arriving Clare had met her future husband, Sean, at a popular Irish dancehall, ‘The Shamrock in Elephant and Castle’. Sean, who was from Roscommon, and had recently finished national service in the British army, then worked for the large Irish building contractor Kilrow, though not, as Clare informed me, as ‘a manual worker’: ‘he was the plant and transport…in the management side, always’.332

As a man of experience in the ways of the metropolis, Sean was able to guide Clare to its wonders:

**Clare:** He introduced me to, like, some days we’d go to the Tower of London, we’d go to Buckingham Palace, we’d go to the War Museum, so it was a great place, because all these things were relatively free, you know, on a Sunday you wouldn’t need much money, you’d go up to Hyde Park and just sit there, and the Serpentine, and at Trafalgar Square, or you’d go up to… is, is Speaker’s Corner still in London? Er, that was tremendous. Have you been?

**Barry:** Er, I’ve never been, but it’s near… it’s in Hyde Park.

330 Clare Cullen, p. 7.
331 Clare Cullen, p. 10.
332 Clare Cullen, p. 13.
Clare: Yeah. I don’t know whether it’s still going on, but that’s... was tremendous, ‘cos you could get up there and speak about anything or anybody, or run anyone down, and just, ‘twas just amazing. And there was always something to... you know, it was really good. And, I... he used to take me to the shows, and the pictures, and as I say that was the best thing, having a boyfriend, then you never paid for anything, you had the boyfriend paying for everything [laughs]. In retrospect it was awful, I often think of that! But, you know... you thought, you could save more money when you have a boyfriend, you know!333

In this courtship narrative the young self is envisioned achieving her aspiration to experience ‘the bright lights of London’. The iconic monuments and landmarks of the metropolis, in particular ‘Speaker’s Corner’, here become symbols of personal development and self-expression, themes central to the discourse of opportunity. At the same time, this experience incorporates Sean, here positioned in two different ways. Initially, Sean is presented as a guide or teacher, someone from whom Clare, positioned as a student, learns. Yet, as with Margo in The Contractors, if the teacher/student relation implies a power imbalance, by the end of the narrative it becomes apparent this could be inverted: ‘you had the boyfriend paying for everything’.

Thus far, the mode of exposition adopted has tended to amplify one story: that of the independent young women who escapes a restrictive familial regime in pursuit of personal fulfilment and romance in the city. In this narrative the familial support network is presented, not as a way of preserving traditional family values, but as a foundation from which to launch a new independent identity, the model for which is in part Clare’s sister herself. Yet closer scrutiny, particularly of the period prior to Clare’s courtship, makes audible a different, less self-assured voice:

Well, my first job I got in Lloyds Bank in, er... up the City of London, and I remember getting out of... and these hu... huge buildings, where everything was so grimy, and you’d, you’d get on the tube and you know, you’d... you’d, in those days all the women used to wear your gloves and everything and they’d be all smuts and everything after just one trip to work. It was really quite grimy, and dirty, you know.334

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333 Clare Cullen, p. 14.
334 Clare Cullen, p. 10.
In this narrative what is recalled is not the city’s iconic landmarks and possibilities for leisure, but its ‘dirt’ and ‘grime’, which ‘after just one trip’ would besmirch Clare’s gloves. The ‘dirt’ and ‘grime’, which had to be negotiated on a daily basis as Clare made her way through the city, between work and her sister’s home, may be read as unconscious markers of an unease with her new projected identity and environment, here metonymised through the reference to wearing gloves. The unconscious surfacing of this unease is suggestive of a prior muting of personal experience:

I was, like, excited, at the idea of coming to London and all this, and seeing all these places. You only… you just heard of or read of. I was very homesick, but I didn’t pretend it, you know, you just kind of always did… we, we were brought up not to show our emotions very much, you know. We, we didn’t cry. We, we didn’t do anything. You kept all your emotions inside. Everything was a bit suppressed…

Although Clare was ‘excited’ about coming to London, she was also ‘very homesick’, but family protocol dictated that such feelings be concealed. The collective ‘we’ here returns to Clare’s account, not as a positive sign of ‘ties that bind’, but of suppression and unresolved conflict. Underlying the preferred narrative of the independent young woman we begin to glimpse emotions of rejection and abandonment as ‘family’ displaces ‘opportunity’ as the frame of memory:

They never sat you down and tried to advise you, or say, “Try it and come back if you don’t like it”, there was never any of that. You went, and that was it. There was no return, you know. And then, when you went, you know, you’d be writing a letter sometimes, and you’d put an odd pound in for your mum and that, you know, when you got your wages and things, you know. But… it… I think its…we were… like, I was seventeen, I was out there, and then when my sister, she got married, and I moved into a flat with a friend. Then when I think when you got your wage, we… you put so much by for your rent, so much by for your fares to work, and so much by for… to buy some clothes and so on… and I, I ne never had any experience of doing it, you just did it. And there was no-one to borrow from if you couldn’t have the fare to work, would have never happened. That is, we always used to sort ourselves out, you know.

‘Family’, more specifically Clare’s parents, remains an important motif in her narrative of pre-marriage years in England, but not as an evocation of continuity, support or belonging.

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335 Clare Cullen, p. 10.
336 Clare Cullen, p. 11.
It is rather the lack of these things that are remembered, resulting in the production of a competing version of experience, one which complicates the process of subjective composure: instead of the self-confident, independent young women spurred on by the desire for urban excitement, we are left in this instance with an image of a seventeen year old fending for herself far from home, with ‘no one to borrow from’, with no option of return.

Set within the context of this narrative Clare’s courtship with Sean takes on a new significance. Clare met Sean in December 1957, only four months after arriving in London, and married him two years later, when Clare was still only 19. Unlike Margo Cullagan, Clare thus does not ‘play the field’. Rather, like Brenda, she became attached early-on to one person whom she later married. From this perspective, as well as being about romance, personal development and, indeed, financial prudence, Clare’s courtship may also have been a response to emotional loss, reflecting a desire for the emotional closeness so lacking at home in Ireland. That said, the fact that Clare seeks to amplify themes of personal development and financial prudence in her presentation of self within this part of her narrative suggests that she does not want to be seen as emotionally dependent on her future husband. This dependency is concealed by a preferred image of assertiveness, implying that this is the ideal aspired to, if not fully realised in practice.

A cautionary tale

If Brenda’s narrative of her pre-marriage experiences was effectively a prelude to getting married, Clare’s narrative articulated competing desires for independence and empowerment on the one hand, and emotional closeness on the other. In the case of the narrative of my third respondent, Rosie, the form desire took was different again. Rosie, whom we met in chapter one, was born in 1938 in Cork city, the third of six children, into a desperately poor family. To a much greater extent than in Clare’s case, Rosie’s memories of this period of her life were fraught with tensions, tensions which at certain points threatened to engulf her narrative. Although she remembered her mother, brothers and sisters with affection, her
father’s abandonment of the family when she was a young girl both stigmatised and further impoverished her family in her account. Having developed an intense hatred of her father in his absence, when he decided to reinstate himself in the family home when Rosie was fifteen, Rosie took a live-in position as an orderly in a local mental institution and became estranged from the family home. It was against this backdrop that Rosie was persuaded by her older sister Anne’s stories of ‘dancehalls and glamour’ to come to London in 1954, aged sixteen.\textsuperscript{337}

Rosie’s narrative of leaving, however, was not a straightforward story of escape to a better life. One of the consequences of her father’s abandonment of the family was that Rosie became an indispensible aide to her mother within the home. On the one hand, this led to the development of a close emotional bond between Rosie and her struggling mother, and to Rosie’s internalisation of a self-image of the dutiful, loyal daughter. In effect, Rosie took on emotional and moral responsibility for the maintenance of the family. On the other, the constraints concomitant with this responsibility gradually engendered competing desires for experiences beyond the home, as she watched her sisters and school friends follow their own individualised paths into adulthood. Rosie’s decision to follow her older sister to London in 1954 represented an attempt to realise these desires for a more independent life, but her narrative of this process was deeply fraught, revealing an inability to reconcile such a desire with counter-posed feelings of love and duty towards her mother and family.\textsuperscript{338}

This competition between tropes of independence and family continued to structure the early stages of her narrative of arrival in England. On arrival, Rosie’s sister Anne was able to find her a live-in position as a domestic in the west-end hotel where she was then employed. However, the work being arduous and the pay low, Rosie eventually ‘got fed up of this hotel’. After only a couple of months Rosie and her sister moved out of the hotel into private lodgings in Kilburn, a working-class area of north London with a dense population of Irish migrants in the post-war decades. At the same time, Rosie and her sister also found a new day-time job in the West End:

\textsuperscript{337} Rosie Long, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{338} Rosie Long, p. 12.
… so my sister said, erm… we got a room in Kilburn. A lot of Irish went to Kilburn. And, we got a job at the Cornerhouse in Marble Arch, London, daily job, you know, were on the… I was on this counter, and loved it! Loved it! Erm, I was on this counter, and you were servin ever so busy you know, and again I was eating as much as I was serving, erm… still that hunger there.  

In this narrative, as in her story of leaving, Rosie presents her sister as the initiator of action as well as her protector, indicating the importance of this family relationship within this part of Rosie’s migration journey. As in Clare’s account, however, this family relationship is also associated with greater autonomy and improving one’s status: the story depicts a progression, from low-status employment in domestic service to a better-paid position with regular hours and greater public visibility in Marble Arch, providing Rosie with a greater sense of responsibility and public recognition.

Yet Rosie’s statement, ‘still that hunger there’, seems riddled with ambivalence, despite any improvement in status. On the surface, it makes reference to Rosie’s materially impoverished childhood. Michael Roper, however, in a recent innovative history of soldiers’ experiences of the front-line during the first world war, has de-coded references to bodily sensations and processes in soldiers letters, in particularly ‘empty stomachs’, as unconscious indictors of underlying emotional longings for important family members ‘back home’. The mother-daughter relationship appears as central in Rosie’s account of childhood, with Rosie repeatedly expressing how close she was to her mother, whom she described as ‘just such as lovely lady’. Although Rosie had moved out of the family home prior to leaving for England, emigration obviously established a more formidable distance between mother and daughter, with the result that while working in the West End Rosie ‘cried every night. I wrote home practically every day to my mum’.

Thus, in both Clare and Rosie’s narratives aspirations to urban excitement and self-improvement co-exist with feelings of loneliness and displacement relating back to the context of family. Such feelings were not resolved through the extension of family ties:

339 Rosie Long, p. 15.
341 Rosie Long, p. 2.
older sisters supplied emotional and material support and could even function as role models for autonomous femininity, but they were not surrogate mothers. Sisters, indeed, were not even the main others in either account. For Clare, as we have seen, the introduction of Sean was important in composing a positive memory of this period. For Rosie, Paddington Station in London’s West End was the setting where she met her sister on arrival; but it was also where she encountered volunteers from the Legion of Mary:

My sister met me at Paddington station, and in those days as well, the Legion of Mary used to be down there, catching girls coming over, because like Mary said, there’d used to be what we’d call ‘wideboys’, who’d know, they’d know straight away you were just over from Ireland, although the city girls were better at dressing up than the country girls, you know, because we were more in style. Erm... and I did, I joined the Legion of Mary. 343

As Frank Mort has argued, although London’s West End had long-standing popular associations with crime and immorality, the decades after 1945 would witness an intensification of public concerns around perceptions of the district as a transient ‘twilight’ zone and hot-bed of ‘vice’. The site of a flourishing post-war sex industry and scene to large rises in a variety of sexual crimes, including a number of high profile public scandals, the West End came to epitomise deteriorating British moral standards in a wide ranging national debate conducted between journalists and police chiefs, politicians and representatives of the tourist industry after the war. Throughout the 1940s and 50s such observers repeatedly linked the area with a range of urban pathologies, from ‘unmarried mothers’ to ‘teenage delinquency’, rampant public prostitution to mixed race relationships and drugs trafficking, inciting a series of local governmental attempts to regulate transgressive displays of sex within its environs. 344

In the context of increasing female migration into urban centres, the posting of Legion of Mary volunteers at bus and train stations represented one means by which the Catholic church attempted to respond to the alarming spectre of post-war ‘vice’ in transient inner-city ‘twilight’ zones. In light of the increased numbers migrating during wartime, in 1942 the Archbishop of Dublin, Charles MacQuaid, had formally established the Catholic Social

343 Rosie Long, p. 12.
Welfare Bureau, one of whose chief functions was ‘forging a link between the emigrant’s home parish and the Catholic authorities abroad’. During wartime monitoring migrants in England had been relatively straightforward due to travel restrictions and the fact that Travel Permits were then only available through one’s parish priest, who would advise migrants to supply the bureau with their details. With the lifting of travel restrictions, surveillance became more difficult in the post-war period, yet, in the view of Catholic observers, the need to monitor migrants was now even more urgent than before or during the war. Writing in 1954, Henry J. Gray of the Catholic Social Welfare Bureau felt that the post-war:

…easement of anxiety as to the dangers of emigration is all the more disquieting when it is realised that the emigrant’s path may now be studded with far more pitfalls than during the war years. Then, as many as a 1000 Irish girls were to be found in the one hostel in a country district in England, with their own chapel and chaplain, their own recreational facilities and little opportunity to indulge in the pleasures – and risk the dangers – of cosmopolitan life.

Post-war de-mobilisation and de-regulation signalled an end to such arrangements, however. Without making contact with the Catholic authorities, and often ‘with but slender resources to tide them over’, young migrants now headed en masse for Britain’s disordered urban centres, where they frequently took shelter in ‘cheap (and possibly none too savoury) lodgings’ and found employment in ‘undesirable jobs’. In addition, migrants appeared to be getting younger:

There have been many cases of children of even fifteen or sixteen years of age travelling to England in such circumstances. Increased facility for changing employment leads many to an aimless drifting from job to job and even from city to city, which increases the risks to exposure to anti-religious and amoral influences and makes for less ready entry into a new social environment of a steadying nature.

As in British national discourses on post-war moral dislocation, London, in particular the West End, was a focal point for anxieties about the de-stabilising effects of disordered urban environments. Writing in 1958, Fr. A. P. Boland reported on the exceptional difficulties faced by Our Lady of the Assumption and Saint Gregory, a parish at the very heart of the West End. As well as around 2000 permanent residents, the parish catered for a ‘floating

population’ of around 8 to 10,000 who worked and lived in the districts’ many bars, nite-clubs and restaurants.\(^{348}\) Of this, Boland estimated that around 85% were Irish Catholics, the majority of whom were women. In his view, not only was the parish ill-equipped to track the movements of this transient population, but more disturbing still, many of the young migrants were inadequately prepared for the dizzying spectacle of glamour and sin daily on display in the district’s streets and throughways:

The fact that more than 50 per cent of the immigrants have their first contact with a city when they come to London might well appal us. The glamour and the bright lights, the endless train and diversity of amusements, many of them unwholesome, the new sense of freedom for which many are inadequately prepared, each exacts its toll. Coupled with this is the stark fact that the agents of immorality are constantly recruiting, seeking to enmesh the weak and unwary. There is easy money to be made. The commercial value of sin is in daily evidence at every street corner.\(^{349}\)

As Boland went on to note, the Legion of Mary, the apostolic lay organisation that staffed the emigrant section of the Catholic Welfare Bureau, represented one means by which the Church might manage the problem of ‘the weak and unwary’ within London’s West End. In addition to disseminating literature and advice manuals in the district’s hotels and restaurants, legion members awaited new arrivals at train and bus stations, ‘catching girls coming over’ as Rosie put it, before they came under the predatory gaze of local ‘wideboys’, poised to exploit their sexual innocence.

As Rosie’s description of the function of the Legion here suggests, the Legion promulgated a cautionary narrative of sexual danger which positioned the female migrant as a vulnerable innocent in need of protection. Yet, if Rosie identified with this construction, one of the assumptions embedded within it, that the naïve innocents arriving from Ireland were all ‘country girls’, is actively rejected by Rosie who, being from Cork, identifies herself with the ‘style’ of the ‘city girls’. In a way that echoes the competing identifications with family and ‘glamour’ articulated through her leaving narrative, Rosie’s memory of arrival seems to project opposing self-images of innocence and sophistication relating to competing versions of Catholic and ‘modern’ femininity. Stimulated through recollections of ‘mortifying’ spectatorship, time and again this competition gave rise to strange tensions in this phase of her narrative:

In Park Lane Hotel, you were plonked in the middle of the West End of London, and there used to be prostitutes walking up and down the front outside, and I used to say to our Anne, “What are they doing there?!” And she said, “Oh, I’ll explain that to you another time.” You know. And, erm, she did eventually, and I thought… was mortified! You know, ‘cos they’d be, they’d just get picked up with a taxi, and they’d go off, and all glamour and furs and all that type of thing. And again, like a lot of Cork people I was kind of starstruck, you know.350

According a range of contemporary observers, the visibility of public prostitution in the West End increased dramatically in the years after the war, and the figure of the glamorously enrobed female prostitute became a prominent character in the flourishing public discourse on metropolitan ‘vice’.351 In Rosie’s narrative, these figures appear as highly conflictual phantasy objects, embodying ideals of independence and fallen womanhood simultaneously, triggering competing desires and anxieties. Evoking both disavowal and idealisation, Rosie recalls being both ‘mortified’ and ‘starstruck’ by the image of ‘prostitutes walking up and down the front outside’. Set amidst the moral chaos of the West End, the confusing spectacle of the glamorous prostitutes provides a means of portraying the innocence and hubris of the misguided younger self as it attempts to make sense of its new environment. In the process, the narrating self is laying down the narrative tracks for the younger self’s moral fall:

I got a room with this friend, who was older than me, and was like… streetwise, I suppose you could say. And erm…( long pause)… and I got in trouble. Erm…(pause)… I had a child. A little boy. Really, I don’t know if I should be telling you this? Er…(pause)…(sigh)… and again of course, that made things ten times worse. Anyway, the father married me. We got, actually got married, in a Catholic church, I think. And, he was an Anglo-Indian. So in other words he was a foreigner. And… and I think the reason that came about was because nobody had ever shown me any kind of affection, or even interest. And this man did. He was, oh! Just lovely, couldn’t do enough for me. And erm, I didn’t, like… stupid, probably, didn’t see nothing in… no harm in having a, a foreigner, so to speak. But again, you see, I’d shamed the family. What family there was. I mean the major one would only have been like cousins and that, you know. But, it didn’t bother me, actually. It didn’t bother me, because I thought, ‘I have to make the best of what’s… what’s here now’ you know, so… I got married. We lived in a flat… a basement flat. It wasn’t, wasn’t a happy relationship at all. He was a lot older than I was anyway. A lot. Erm… and then had a little girl, so, that was two children I had.352

350 Rosie Long, p. 15.
351 Mort, F. Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society (Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 42-45
352 Rosie Long, p. 16.
Having parted company with her sister, whom she felt had become overbearing, Rosie moves in with a girl she describes as ‘older’ and more ‘streetwise’, the proverbial ‘bad company’, and before long she has been ‘led astray’: as she hesitantly reveals, ‘I got into trouble’. Reflecting on this event from the distance of the present, Rosie explains its occurrence in terms of flattery and the low self-esteem of the younger self. Her relationship with the man she would marry appeared to offer the prospect of romantic love and affection, things of which the young self had no prior experience, yet desperately yearned for. As it turned out, the relationship only served to enhance her sense of isolation and alienation. Despite marrying the child’s father in a Catholic church, Rosie had ‘shamed the family’ by becoming pregnant and entering into marriage with, as she put it, ‘a foreigner’. Her family ties all but severed, Rosie resolved to ‘make the best of it’, and moved into a basement flat with her new husband. Isolated and hidden away, family life in the subterranean dwelling, however, proved intolerable, and after having a second child Rosie made her escape to Oldham in 1966, taking her two children with her.\textsuperscript{353}

In this narrative the tensions between competing models of femininity are worked out in terms of the fate of the naïve/wilful emigrant prophesised within cautionary religious narratives. But this mode of resolution, involving Rosie’s take-up of the identity of ‘the fallen woman’, has highly ambivalent results in terms of subjective composure. The narrative, as a means of articulating the personal in terms of the general, facilitates the emotional and cognitive processing of an experience whose trauma is articulated through the deep pauses that punctuate Rosie’s tentative confession. More precisely, the construct of the naïve and vulnerable emigrant girl enables Rosie to project responsibility for her transgression onto a range of external others, collectively embodied in the alluring figure of the West End prostitute, the unsettling symbol of urban moral disorder. Yet, given the concept of original sin, the ‘fallen woman’ was never a blameless victim: the journey from vulnerable emigrant to ‘unmarried mother’ assumed a degree of agency on the part of the emigrant, however ‘unworldly’ she might be within cautionary stories about British morality. Prescriptive literature advising on the duties of the emigrant girl in England emphasised responsibility concomitantly with vulnerability: according to one such 1953 pamphlet:

\textsuperscript{353} Rosie Long, p. 17.
The sixth commandment forbids whatever is contrary to Holy purity in looks, words or deeds. It is here that the Irish girl has a great responsibility. She it is who dictates whether sin is to be committed or not. She is failing in her solemn duty if she allows a man to be impure with her by word or action.\footnote{Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, \textit{A Catholic Handbook for Irish Men and Women Going to England} (Dublin, 1953), p.17}

In Rosie’s case, the issue of ‘purity’ was further complicated by the fact that her ‘illegitimate’ child was the product of intimacy with ‘a foreigner’. The anxieties accumulated around the figure of the female emigrant within Catholic discourse were not the simple product of concerns for her ‘welfare’, but were underpinned by fears about secularisation. Intimacy with a ‘non-Catholic’ was viewed as one of the principal mechanisms by which such secularisation proceeded amongst migrants since the children of such a union were potentially ‘lost’ to the church. As Fr. Leonard Sheil lamented in an article in \textit{The Furrow} in 1958, ‘an appalling tragedy is taking place now in England’:\footnote{Leonard Sheil, ‘Marriage and the Leakage’, \textit{The Furrow}, 9, 8 (1958), pp. 522-523.}

\begin{quote}
The cause is mainly bad marriages. The Catholic married someone who had no religion, who never knelt down in the house to pray and never went to any church on Sunday. As the children grew up, this example from a parent whom they loved and admired destroyed their religion. Whether this marriage took place in a Catholic church or in a registrar’s office does not seem to make much difference, as far as the children are concerned.\footnote{NAI, DT S 11582 C, ‘Irish Labour Emigration’, 23 July 1951. See also Gerard Brady, ‘Irish Catholics in Britain’, \textit{The Furrow}, 1, 8 (1950), pp. 407-408.}
\end{quote}

Traditionally, concerns about ‘leakage’ in Britain had centred on intermarriage between Catholics and Protestants, but during the post-war period new anxieties emerged in relation to mixing with commonwealth immigrants. As early as 1951, Catholic social workers were reporting with alarm the intermixing of Irish Catholics which such immigrants in the inner-city lodging houses of major urban centres, and in particular, on the phenomenon of ‘Irish girls’ forming romantic liaisons with ‘black men’.\footnote{NAI, DT S 11582 C, ‘Irish Labour Emigration’, 23 July 1951. See also Gerard Brady, ‘Irish Catholics in Britain’, \textit{The Furrow}, 1, 8 (1950), pp. 407-408.} Recounting the experiences of a priest out on his rounds in a London parish, Fr. Sheil drew out the implications of such relationships in his article ‘Marriage and the Leakage’. The priest called first at the home of a girl whose family in Ireland ‘had asked him to do something for them’: 
The door was opened by a lovely young Irish girl. Beside her stood a little mite of perhaps three years, with a ribbon in her hair. The girl admitted that she was married in the registry.

“Is that little girl yours?”
“Yes”
“What’s her name?”
“Fatima.”
“That’s a nice Catholic name”.
“Not at all; it’s the name of the Prophet’s daughter.”
She was married to a Mohammedan from Fiji!357

Later the same day the priest travelled across London to the East End, ‘to try and cope with another bad marriage’:

This door was opened by another fresh and charming Irish girl. ‘Come upstairs, Father’. In the room above her husband, a Hindu, was sitting at a small table against the wall. The girl sat down by the fire and watched in silence the discussion between the two men. Alas! No good came of it.358

Articulated at a time when simmering racial tensions in Britain were beginning to erupt into popular violence, such anxieties marked another point of contact between British discourses on metropolitan ‘vice’ and Catholic concerns about the secularising effects of ‘cosmopolitanism’. As historians of race have observed, post-war British racial paranoia was framed through tropes of white Britishness ‘endangered’ by the ‘invasion’ of ‘coloured’ immigrants. A recurrent feature of this discourse were miscegenationist fantasies in which relationships between white women and black men formed the basis of a conception of white womanhood as prey to the savage appetites of black men. In such fantasies, pure white women were portrayed as victims of black desire, symbolising the victimisation of the British race as a whole, but they were also objects to be policed, disciplined and disavowed.359 As the title of a 1954 article in the Picture Post asked: “Would You Let Your Daughter Marry a Negro?”360

For Rosie, these inter-related discourses on religious ‘leakage’ and endangered whiteness proved difficult to negotiate because they offered ways of understanding the events of her pre-marriage years that repeatedly threatened to bring the self into contradiction:

Rosie: The… it wasn’t a happy relationship, but I… as long as my children were alright, I would put up with almost anything. And it got so as I thought, ‘No, this is… this is enough, enough is enough.’ I even went to the priest and I said, “I’m leaving,” I said, you know, “I just can’t live this life.” It got so as like he was bringing his mates in, like I said he was older than I was, and he’d bring his mates in, and I’d be sitting up in bed, and he said, “There she is, she’s good for nothing!” You know. And, that’s another thing, another man in my life, sort of… pulling me down, kind of thing, you know. So I thought, my sister, God rest her soul, had got a letter from an auntie who had moved up to Oldham in Lancashire, me Auntie Kitty – the Auntie Kitty who was our saviour as kids. So I, “Oh I’d love to see Auntie Kitty!” So I came up for a weekend, one weekend, and I said, “That’s it!” Next weekend I was there, lock, stock and barrel. So I just left, with my two children. And went to Oldham.

Barry: What year was this?
Rosie: 1966. 1966, yeah. So, and my son had… just made his communion, so… we’d moved up to Oldham, and again you see I… my, erm… my son kinda looked foreign, if you like. My daughter didn’t, you know. It never bothered me. But it did a lot of other people. I got a lot of, erm… [sighs] Again, didn’t help my situation and my confidence, or… you know what I mean? A… again, I was different. I was that one who was different, you know?361

This memory of escape to Oldham depicts a self struggling to negotiate a maze of subject-positions as it strives for redemption in the face of competing prohibitions and designations. In response to the figure of the priest, who presumably counselled against the break-up of the family, Rosie seems to invoke the image of the victimised white woman to justify her escape to Aunt Kitty’s, ‘our saviour when we were kids’. Oldham, however, does not provide the desired redemption but becomes the site of further discomposure, marking the reopening of a destructive conversation with the distant past and the deep introjection of negative images of self. Although she has escaped the domestic misery of her marriage to a ‘foreign’ husband in London, the powerful definitional effects of racial norms inhibit Rosie’s transcendence of the consequences of that liaison. Rosie’s first-born son ‘kinda looked foreign’, and although it ‘never bothered’ her, ‘it did a lot of other people’. Instead of the hoped-for new beginning, the reflection ends on a note of dejection, bringing together

361 Rosie Long, p. 17.
episodes from distinct phases of Rosie’s life as proof of the inescapable otherness of the self: ‘again, I was different. I was the one who was different’.

**Ambivalent Relations**

Historiographical discussion on the experiences of Irish women in twentieth century Britain has congealed around two inter-related questions. Firstly, was migration to Britain an empowering experience for women? Secondly, did Irish women ‘assimilate’ more rapidly than men? On one side of this debate, scholars seeking to challenge claims about ‘assimilation’ of the Irish in Britain have stressed continuity in Irish migrant femininities. If migration to England enabled women to improve their status materially, the material benefits of migration were typically used to secure the family holding back in Ireland, and later, to establish a family of one’s own in England. Migration to and settlement in England was effectively governed by a desire to realise the ‘traditional’ ideals of Irish Catholic femininity in a new setting, in the absence of opportunities to do this in Ireland. On the other side of the debate, scholars have linked migration with discontinuity: mass female migration to England was an attempt to escape the constraints of Irish patriarchy, signalling rising expectations on the part of this generation of young Irish women, whether within or outside of marriage. On this reading, migration to and settlement in England was governed by a collective desire for greater freedoms and control over one’s life, marking a trajectory away from the subservience and self-sacrifice associated with ‘traditional’ femininity towards more assertive, ‘modern’ forms, implicitly associated with British femininity. Claims about the empowerment of migrant women thus presupposed a degree of ‘integration’ or ‘assimilation’ on the part of Irish women migrants.

The three narratives of pre-marriage experiences analysed in this chapter suggest a more complex picture than either of these opposing views allows. In their accounts, women did not interact with one image of femininity consistently, but negotiated and took-up multiple images of femininity, related to a variety of religious, familial and metropolitan discourses. As well as the construct of the adventurous and assertive young woman, subjects interacted with notions of exile and the good girl emigrant, the naïve innocent in the city and the fallen woman, the victimised white woman and the proud mother. In each case, the constructs interacted with and the form the interaction took was never directly determined by factors
such as family structure, age, date of arrival, destination or form of employment, though these things shaped migrants’ experiences. Rather, subjects sought to make sense of their individually specific experiences of this phase of their migration journey through constructing them in terms of the available discursive options. How subjects interacted with competing images of femininity was conditioned by this process of ‘making sense’: investing in the available discursive forms was underpinned by a desire to make the most significant features of one’s pre-marriage experiences, and so different parts of the self, cohere.

In these narratives, realising this desire for unity and coherence proved to be no simple matter. Both the continuity and discontinuity theses can be read as narratives about the realisation of different feminine identities. In the former case, settlement is equated with the realisation of an image of ‘traditional’ Irish femininity; successful settlement presupposes the reproduction of the Irish Catholic family in England. In the latter case, settlement is equated with the realisation of an image of independence and self-assertion: successful settlement presupposes having greater control over one’s life, whether this concerns participation within the labour market or within the family in the roles of wife and mother. The three narratives examined within this chapter, however, suggests a much more ambivalent relation to these ideals of ‘settled’ femininity. While the process of narration in each case was certainly shaped by attempts to compose versions of self in terms of such ideals, these narratives of pre-marriage experiences were also riven with tensions and conflicts, displaying signs of discomposure as much as composure. The three narratives examined here suggested that identity construction in the years between leaving for England and getting married was a difficult and problematic process, shot through with anxiety and loss as well as excitement and satisfaction, and rarely arriving smoothly at a pre-destined point of self-realisation. Even with the passing of many years, memories of this period continued to arouse complicated emotions, indicating that the conflicts associated with the period remained to some extent unresolved.

An important part of the explanation for this concerns the complex and contradictory character of women’s discursive options. While the ways in which each subject negotiated their experiences was highly specific, this phase in the migration journey, overlapping with a distinct phase in the life cycle of each migrant, confronted women with a potentially
confusing array of competing discourses. Interstitial between leaving one family and creating another, between belonging in one place and settling in another, women’s pre-marriage years were scene to competing prescriptions and prohibitions, expectations and opportunities, dangers and pleasures, the negotiation of which could be a tricky business. The ideals of ‘independence’ and ‘family’ were not, therefore, mutually exclusive poles, but elements embedded within competing versions of femininity which subjects’ took-up and distanced themselves from in different ways, at different points in their narratives. In this respect, desire was never pointed in one direction, but multiple directions simultaneously, complicating the idea that migration was a ‘strategy’, governed by and ending with the realisation of an overarching goal.

In turn, if women’s narratives were not focused on one goal consistently, neither were they focused on one place. In each narrative, the interplay between competing ideals of femininity conditioned and was conditioned by an ongoing dialogue between here and there: subjects’ attempts to make different aspects of their experiences cohere was inextricably entangled with a desire to compose a stable relation between the place, more specifically the people, left behind, and the circumstances of their new environments. Although closely related to the ways in which migration affects family relationships, and simultaneously, to the ways in which femininity positions young women within those relationships, this entanglement was neither a simple ‘lengthening of family ties’ or a clean severance of them, but an interaction by which subjects’ struggled to negotiate conflicting emotions of guilt and loss, anger and rejection, love and regret. In interaction with the confusing range of discursive options confronting women, this re-negotiation of familial relations brought about by migration forms a second important part of the explanation of the emotional fluctuation and dissonance observed in these narratives. That the narratives of the men in this sample did not readily evidence these characteristics implies either that a) men were less affected by the way migration re-conditioned family relationships, or that b) men avoided this kind of emotional display within their narratives. In both instances, an explanation would appear to point back to the role of gender training: either the period in between leaving and marriage (and after) was more straightforward for men in terms of the emotional consequences of altered family relationships because the organisation of familial dynamics was constitutive of masculinities that implicitly prepared men for life beyond the family by conditioning their emotional ties to family members in different ways. Or emotional
continence was engendered as a basic imperative in spaces of masculine socialisation and performance.

In sum, these various observations suggest the need to critically re-think the terms of the questions around which debate on Irish migrant women’s experiences have congealed. It is not simply that both positions within this debate offer unjustifiable generalisations about the meaning of many different women’s experiences, but that the category ‘Irish women’ within this debate tends to presuppose an understanding of subjectivity as coherent and internally unified at the level of the individual. In effect, generalisations about the sameness of women’s experiences are founded on a unitary notion of the subject. By contrast, following the lead given by John McGahern’s portrayal of Elizabeth Reegan, this chapter has suggested that feminine migrant subjectivities were a much more fractured affair, migration to and settlement in post-war England an experience characterised by the negotiation of multiple, contradictory images of selfhood. On this reading, the question, ‘were women empowered through migration to England?’ cannot yield a finished, unitary answer. Rather, the analytic object becomes how different women negotiated their experiences of migration within the specific context of their own lives, a re-framing which cautions against unreflexive use of the broad category ‘Irish women’.
Chapter Four

Re/Negotiating ‘suspicion’: Exploring the construction of self in Irish Migrant’s memories of the 1996 Manchester bomb

Coming under ‘suspicion’

At a quarter past eleven in the morning, on Saturday the 15 June 1996, the Provisional IRA exploded a 3000 lb bomb in Manchester City, the second largest bomb on the British mainland since the Second World War. Contained within a white transit van parked on Corporation Street, only yards from the Arndale shopping centre in the city’s main retail district, the bomb caused extensive damage to the city centre and injured over 200 civilians, most of whom had been struck by falling glass and debris.362 Within the hour over 81 ambulances, dispatched from Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, Lancashire and Merseyside, would arrive to a scene of smoke and rubble to treat the wounded and traumatised.363

For many British journalists writing in the national press, the bomb’s chief significance lay in its relation to the ‘end-game’ politics then being played out between the political actors who would eventually sign the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.364 The bomb’s relation to this context, plus the fact that no deaths had resulted, partially explain the relatively constrained response of the national media, which on the whole eschewed the rhetoric of national outrage that frequently saturated the post-attack coverage of such incidents in the 70s and 80s. At the local level, however, the bomb was figured as ‘a chilling reminder of the IRA’s capacity for evil’, and provided local journalists and politicians with an opportunity to

revive a ‘blitz’ narrative, addressing Mancunians as shell-shocked but proud and defiant in the face of a great trauma.\textsuperscript{365} Titles and sub-headings in five local papers proclaimed the event a shared experience of ‘horror’, ‘terror’ and ‘tragedy’, inflicted by ‘evil’ and ‘cowardly’ bombers on ‘innocent’ and ‘vulnerable’ civilians.\textsuperscript{366} As Lord Mayor of the city Derek Shaw put it, however, Mancunian ‘resilience and pluck’ would ultimately ensure victory over the ‘terrorists’: ‘we will not be defeated’.\textsuperscript{367}

The position of the city’s large Irish population in relation to the civic ‘we’ constructed through this reportage was ambiguous. On the day of the attack, an article in the \textit{Manchester Evening News} reported that ‘police believe the IRA has a number of units in mainland Britain’.\textsuperscript{368} By Monday the location of the internal threat had seemingly become more precise. In a page two article entitled ‘Why Manchester?’, the text tacitly sets up an association between ‘50,000 Irish born people in Manchester’ and ‘the bombers evil message of terror’. According to the second paragraph:

As anti-terrorist forensic experts pieced together fragments of the lorry bomb in the hunt for clues, fears mounted that a local active IRA cell could be capable of carrying out further attacks.\textsuperscript{369}

Such implications, which the \textit{Manchester Evening News} evolved in the ensuing months into a serialised story about the ‘hunt’ for men with ‘Irish accents’, facilitated a process whereby local anger incited by the bomb was displaced onto the local Irish community in the form of a suspicious gaze. On the evening following the bomb, the Irish Heritage Centre at Cheetham Hill would receive several abusive phone calls, one warning ‘Watch out, you murdering Irish bastards, you are going to get it tonight!’.\textsuperscript{370} In Middleton that night ten men walked into and violently vandalised a local Irish bar in full view of staff and customers.\textsuperscript{371}

\textsuperscript{366} Words from titles and sub-headings in the \textit{Manchester Evening News}, \textit{Wigan Observer}, \textit{Stockport Express}, \textit{Moston Express} and \textit{Middleton and North Manchester Guardian} during the two weeks following the bomb.
\textsuperscript{367} Quoted in ‘Beware the Wounded Lion’, \textit{Manchester Evening News}, June 17, 1996.
\textsuperscript{368} ‘MPs Fury as Peace Hopes Dim’, \textit{Manchester Evening News}, June 15, 1996.
\textsuperscript{369} ‘Why Manchester?’, \textit{Manchester Evening News}, June 17, 1996.
\textsuperscript{370} Andrew Grimes, ‘IRA “bombed their own”’, \textit{Manchester Evening News}, June 20, 1996.
This paper uses oral history to explore the distinct ways three Irish migrants, all of whom settled in Manchester during the post-war decades, recall and negotiate their experiences of the Manchester bomb and its aftermath. To date, studies of the effects of ‘The Troubles’ upon the Irish in Britain have tended to frame their analyses in terms of twin concepts of ‘repression’ and ‘invisibility’. As such studies have convincingly argued, ‘The Troubles’ mark a period when Irish people in Britain were once again problematised as political subversives.\(^\text{372}\) As well as widespread media stereotyping, by which ‘Paddy’ was reconstructed in the guise of ‘the terrorist’, this took the form of state anti-terrorism measures whose technologies of surveillance, incarceration and exclusion took as their prime focus Irish people resident in Britain. Designed to materialise the putative ‘enemy within’, such practices produced the Irish in Britain as a ‘suspect community’,\(^\text{373}\) resulting in the infringement of that ‘community’ s civil rights within the British justice system while aggravating a deep-seated anti-Irish racism within British culture more generally.\(^\text{374}\) In the face of the formidable forces mobilised against it, Irish identity in Britain during this period underwent a form of repression: ‘The consequence is that Irish people living here are not only less likely to engage in political activities associated with Ireland but have adopted a low profile about being Irish.’\(^\text{375}\)

In seeking to demonstrate the repressive effects of this culture of suspicion upon Irish people, such studies have typically approached oral history as a form of ‘testimony’, deployed to recover experiences of discrimination and racism previously invisible within British historiography and public discourse more generally. By contrast, this chapter approaches personal narratives as complex distillations of migrant subjectivity, approaching the Manchester bomb as a site of memory in relation to which respondents actively engage in reconstructing their experiences of ‘The Troubles’ as a whole. Approached thus, personal


\(^{373}\) Hillyard, *Suspect Community*.


narrative provides a means of exploring the production of memory in process – of exploring how temporally disparate but conceptually linked experiences congeal into new memory forms while others are repressed or forgotten, and how this individually specific process is shaped through reciprocal interactions between competing cultural forms and interior psychic processes. Such an analysis not only complicates any attempt to read oral narrative as a repository of ‘objective’ fact, but more importantly, provides an opportunity to examine how migrant’s negotiation of the forms of ‘suspicion’ they encountered were productive, rather than repressive, of distinct forms of subjectivity. As such, with reference to ‘first-generation’ Irish migrants, the following analysis embodies a suggestive attempt to think the relation between ‘The Troubles’ and ‘Irish identity’ in terms other than negation.

**Memories of the Manchester Bomb**

The atmosphere of hostility and suspicion generated in the aftermath of the bomb was recalled in a distinct way in the migration narrative of Sean, who was living in Rochdale, a northern suburb of Greater Manchester, at the time of the attack. Born in 1935, Sean grew up in Co. Offaly, the eldest son in a family of six where the main breadwinner, Brenda’s father, was a farm labourer. After leaving school at fourteen to help supplement the family’s meagre income, Sean eventually migrated to Bolton in 1956, aged 21, due to the irregular and poorly remunerated state of employment in his local area. Arriving in Bolton, Sean immediately found work in a cotton mill, and soon after met his Clare-born wife at a local Irish club, marrying her within the year at a local Catholic church. Sean would spend the next 20 years working and raising his family of 4 children in Bolton, before moving to Rochdale in 1976. This coincided with spell of employment as a labourer for Wimpey’s building contractors, before Sean secured work as a night-time security guard at Rochdale College, where he was employed at the time of the bomb in 1996.

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376 Sean Hagan, pp. 1-5.
378 Sean Hagan, pp. 7-9, 11-12.
379 Sean Hagan, p. 11.
380 Sean Hagan, p. 16. s
Prior to the onset of ‘The Troubles’, Sean had not experienced friction with English people. On the contrary, during the course of his first job in a cotton mill in Bolton, where he worked for 17 years, he found his co-workers:

…were all very friendly, you know, they were all very sociable and that. Yeah, I didn’t have, find any fault with any of them. And they were all English people. All of them. You only got the odd Irish man amongst... about forty English people, and... you got on great with them! All my friends were English, when I was in Bolton.381

Despite this, however, with the commencement of the IRA’s bombing campaign in the early 1970s Sean began to feel ‘awkward’ in public spaces:

…every time anything happened, I felt terrible going out. Even going to work. Yeah, because they were all talking about it, you know?382

Most prominent in Sean’s memories of this period was the aftermath of the Manchester bomb, which was recalled as a period of particular tension:

Sean: My local pub in Rochdale, I walked into it. I used to call for a pint on my way home from work. And they used to all... er, salute you when you come in. “Hiya, hiya Sean”, or... And this day, when that bomb come off... went off (excuse me) I went into the pub for a pint again. There was a big hush. When I opened my mouth for... to ask for my pint. They were... and they wasn’t waiting for you. They used to have it ready. When they see me coming through the door they used to pump the pint. Waiting until I opened my mouth and then as soon as they heard my accent, there was a big hush.

Barry: What did... what did that make you feel like?

Sean: I, I were embarrassed. I stopped going in. For a couple of months, yeah. I stopped going in the pub. I felt very embarrassed. It was shocking, that, I didn’t agree with that bombing there, in... It wasn’t nice, was it? Not nice for the people that were living here, you know.

Barry: And do you go back to the pub now?

Sean: Oh, they were... well it’s closed down now. I used... oh I did, I went back to it, eventually, when everything calmed down. But... on that... I remember that, I’ll never forget that. When that happened. I, I felt very embarrassed. Even embarrassed in work, when, when I went to work. All my mates, workmates are

382 Sean Hagan, p. 33.
English and that. And you were one, the Irish man, there was just... you just, you...  

The first thing to note about this story is the way it mixes up and integrates details from temporally distinct events. In this memory, the pub scene occurs after Sean has finished work, on Saturday 15 June 1996. However, as Sean recalled in the section of his migration narrative concerning work, in 1996 he was working as a security guard at Rochdale College, where he typically worked seven night-shifts a week, between the hours of 4pm and 6.30am. Calling for a drink after work was thus unlikely to have been a regular practice during this phase of Sean’s work history. Further, Sean mentions feeling ‘embarrassed’ amongst his ‘workmates’ who ‘were all English’. However, as Sean earlier told me, he usually worked alone during his time as a night security guard. These inconsistencies suggest that details of earlier events have become entangled in the memory of the aftermath of the Manchester bomb, which may be seen to compress the most personally salient aspects of temporally disparate experiences of ‘The Troubles’ into one condensed form.

This may be because Manchester is the most recent in the series of events that constitute ‘The Troubles’ for Sean, or it may be that the tensions following Manchester left a particular impression. As the form of the memory suggests, this itself may have to do with the fact that, in the 1990s in particular, a circuit developed within British culture through which understandings of discrimination generated within the particular public of the Irish community re-entered British discourse at the national level, becoming available for public consumption. As in earlier periods of settlement in Britain, Irish migrants to England after 1945 established networks of bodies and institutions, facilitating the construction of an Irish particular public within British culture. Initially, as one recent study has suggested, the focus of these formations was to ‘provide social outlets, offer assistance to those in need of help, and generally cater for Irish interests’. However, with the intensification of anti-Irish feeling aroused by ‘The Troubles’ from the 1970s, a process of questioning was gradually initiated whereby the issue of ‘Irish interests’ and how best they could be served became subject to debate. Particularly around the London area, the 1980s witnessed a burgeoning of more militant forms of community activism, a process shaped by the events of ‘The

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383 Sean Hagan, p. 34.
384 Sean Hagan, pp. 16-17.
Troubles’ but also the vocabulary of ‘multiculturalism’, on which activists drew to contest ‘anti-Irish racism’ and imagine and make claims for an ‘ethnic’ Irish identity.\(^{386}\)

In the period following the release of the Guildford Four in 1989, which groups associated with this new activism played a part in securing, such activists and community representatives were increasingly able to locate a national audience, even as a new wave of republican attacks triggered a revitalisation of the discourse of ‘suspicion’ in right-wing tabloids. As well as the public projection of striking images of institutional racism, most viscerally in Jim Sheridan’s 1993 film In the Name of the Father,\(^{387}\) the 1990s saw the publication of a range of research reports on discrimination against and disadvantage within the Irish community, most importantly Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain: A Report of Research Undertaken for the Commission for Racial Equality.\(^{388}\) The importance of such reports here is that they collected personal narratives of discrimination shaped at the level of the local and particular, and made them available to a national audience in generalised form, aided in the process by a range of local and national newspapers who reported their main findings.\(^{389}\)

In terms of the reconstruction of personal experience following the Manchester bomb, the figure of the victim within public images of discrimination against Irish people supplies a subject-position from which individuals such as Sean can relate and receive recognition for their own personal experiences of hostility. In the process, reconstruction is shaped in accordance with the form of the generalised image, such that fragments of experience relating to temporally distinct but paradigmatically associated events crystallise into a memory that is factually inconsistent but ‘autobiographically true’.\(^{390}\)

\(^{387}\) In the Name of the Father (dir. Jim Sheridan, 1993, UK, Hell’s Kitchen Films).
This ‘autobiographical truth’ in turn provides access to what the bomb, and ‘The Troubles’ more generally, means to Sean personally. Sean’s story of the ‘big hush’, set in the communal space of the pub, relates an experience of coming ‘under suspicion’, and of symbolic exclusion, in a place in which he was not usually aware of being different, that is of ‘being Irish’. For Sean, this frosty reception in a place where he was usually warmly received induced ‘embarrassment’. As well as awkward self-consciousness, this polysemic term, which Sean uses repeatedly to describe his response to ‘The Troubles’, also intimates feelings of guilt and shame. If the story of the ‘big hush’ constructs an analogy for the way in which ‘The Troubles’ rendered Sean’s Irishness an object of suspicion, the term ‘embarrassment’ intimates how this gaze has been internalised, with Sean having taken on a kind of responsibility for the act carried out in the name of ‘Irish freedom’. The term thus articulates a complex doubleness in Sean’s sense of belonging. On the one hand, Sean feels ashamed because the bomb is associated with Irishness, a category of identity with which he identifies himself. At the same time, however, such feelings evidence introjection of the condemnation of the subject behind the suspicious gaze, indicating identification with the community of the pub. From this perspective, the bomb is remembered by Sean as an event which placed an unwanted strain on valued relationships at a communal level, producing conflict within a hybrid sense of belonging.

Sean works to resolve this conflict in two inter-related ways:

Sean: It was just very awkward. They just stared at you, you know. Was not nice. Not a nice thing to happen. That’s why it was lovely and peaceful there up to a few weeks ago, wasn’t it? They’re starting again. Very embarrassing, that, again, innit. And a couple... for a few hooligans, you know. Because it’s united now, in the last few years, now. It’s been great the last twelve year. It’s been great over there.

Barry: Did any...

Sean: Let’s hope... let’s hope it settles down again. You know, we don’t like this bl... this bombing, it’s shocking. Not doing anything for us. Not doing any good for... for the Irish people is it? 391

On the 7 March 2009, two weeks prior to my interview with Sean, dissident Republicans in Northern Ireland shot and killed two British soldiers stationed at Massereene army base in

391 Sean Hagan, p. 34.
Co. Antrim, the first political murders in the province since the 1997 ceasefire. Sean’s identification of ‘a few hooligans’ as the cause of the problem ‘over there’ re-enacts a strategy of projective disavowal by which, at a number of points during the discussion, he endeavoured to differentiate himself from the views and actions of ‘extreme’ republicanism. As he earlier states in relation to the Manchester bomb, Sean ‘didn’t agree with that bombing there’: ‘I think it’s pointless, what they are doing, my self’. Sean prefers to focus on what he sees as the progress that has been made towards ‘peace’ in Northern Ireland. If harmony could be maintained ‘over there’, Sean seems to be saying, a closure could be imposed ‘over here’ and the tensions of the past allowed to fade: ‘let’s hope.. let’s hope it settles down again. You know, we don’t like this…this bombing, it’s shocking’.

In constructing himself as a member of a local Irish community opposed to ‘this bombing’, Sean here locates a subject-position which opens the possibility of re-alignment between the categories ‘Mancunian’ and ‘Irish’ through positing a shared experience of victimisation in opposition to the perpetrators of the bomb. This position was constructed through a particular set of local responses. If some local reactions to the bomb placed the Manchester Irish community under a suspicious gaze, other journalists and local civic leaders, some themselves of Irish extraction, sought to uphold the Irish community’s ‘innocence’. Following the pub attack in Middleton the chairman of the Middleton Township Committee, Henry West, condemned the attacks as ‘sick’: ‘It is tarring the whole Irish population with the abomination done by a tiny minority’.

According to an article in the Manchester Evening News on the Tuesday after the bomb, which asked ‘Why Us?’:

It is a question which puzzles those of Irish descent who live and work here just as much as those who are proud to call themselves native Mancunians. They are deeply embarrassed to be associated by birth with such cowardly, callous scum.

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392 The event was widely reported in the British media. Details from BBC report, ‘Two Soldiers Killed in Northern Ireland’, March 9, 2009, at [http://news.bbc.co.uk](http://news.bbc.co.uk)

393 Moston Express, June 20, 1996. It is worth noting that other civic leaders who defended the Irish community’s ‘innocence’, such as Pat Karney, were themselves of Irish extraction, Karney having been born in Dublin for example. See Manchester Evening News, June 17, 1996.

394 Manchester Evening News, June 18, 1996.
This construction of local Irish ‘embarrassment’ established the basic parameters within which local Irish community leaders sough to dispel popular suspicions concerning Irish people. In the week following the bomb Michael Forde, chairman of the Irish World Heritage Centre at Cheetham Hill and vice-chair of the Federation of Irish Societies, emphasised that ‘Irish people’ regarded Manchester as ‘their city’, ‘reflected in the contributions they make to their city in all sorts of ways’. As such, ‘this horror, that has been done in the name of the Irish people, has sickened the Irish people everywhere, not least in Manchester’. Thus, like other Mancunians, the Irish had been unfairly victimised; like other Mancunians, the Irish were angry with the IRA; and, like other Mancunians, the Irish people had thought that the IRA ceasefire, called on 31 August 1994, signalled an end to violence and the beginnings of ‘peace’:

I thought that all this futile misery of guns and bombs was behind us. We Irish are not just gutted by what the IRA did. We are horrified, saddened and angry. We believed that after 25 years of being in the front line we could all live together in peace. Whenever a bomb has gone off, the Irish people have gone under suspicion. And it is so unfair.395

With its central themes of unfair victimisation, shared anger towards the IRA, community ties, and the desire for ‘peace’, Michael Forde’s response to local hostility following the bomb echoed that of many other community representatives called upon to speak following attacks in the past. Formulated within the conservative space of ‘official’ associational culture, and expressive of a conservative, Catholic code of Irishness associated with settlement in England during the post-war decades, this narrative protests the innocence of an unfairly suspected Irish community, presented as integrated within British society, and seeks reparation with that society through the disavowal of IRA violence and the idealisation of peace. For Sean, who settled in England in 1952, this narrative provides a framework within which he seeks to construct a personal memory of the bomb that facilitates negotiation of the conflict of belonging the event dramatises for him.

In the process, however, the politics associated with this identity conflict at the institutional level are rendered invisible in Sean’s narrative. Because the community narrative through which Sean constructs his experiences works defensively to split-off the historical and

395 Michael Forde, quoted in, ‘IRA “bombed their own”’, Manchester Evening News, June 20, 1996.
political context in which Republican strategy is formulated, so it could be seen as supportive of the regulatory function of the suspicious gaze, providing a subject-position which discourages the public expression of support for nationalist goals. In this respect, the personal memories of my second respondent were distinct from those of Sean’s. Joe, a retired construction worker, migrated from a small farming background in Longford to Birmingham in 1962, aged 17, before moving to Manchester in 1965. Unlike the majority of respondents in my sample, who usually waited until asked directly about their experiences of ‘The Troubles’, Joe zoned in on issues connected with Anglo-Irish political history early on in the interview. During the course of a discussion about memories of school, occurring some four minutes after the beginning of the interview, Joe recalled that one of his teachers at technical school, attended between 1956-59, was ‘Rory Brady’: 397

It was the norm then that you went to Technical School for a couple o’years..my teacher, believe it or not, at the time..was a well known man, you’ve probably will have heard of him, Rory Brady? 398

As Joe went on to explain, ‘Rory Brady’, a ‘brilliant teacher’, was ‘one of the Republicans…he’s President of Sinn Fein at the moment’. Joe ‘was in school the day he was taken out of it’, that is ‘he was virtually lifted for being a member of an illegal organisation’. At the time, Joe ‘didn’t understand why’, however:

…when we started you know getting a bit of sense, y’know, started to learn what politics was about, we found out then. 399

These stories seek to appropriate the chance intersection between the biographies of the Republican leader, whose political credentials were unknown to the young Joe, and the young self as evidence of a shared lineage. 400 This interweaving of trajectories, by which

396 Joe Doherty, pp. 1.
397 Rory Brady, or Ruairí Ó Bradaigh, was President of ‘Republican Sinn Fein’, an anti-constitutional party within the Republican movement distinct from Provisional Sinn Fein, between 1987-2009.
398 Joe Doherty, p. 2.
399 Joe Doherty, p. 3.
400 Indeed, there is reason to doubt the veracity of Joe’s story here. A recent biography of Brady’s early life suggests that while Brady was from Longford and was a teacher in 1956 when he was lifted in connection with the IRA’s Boarder Campaign of 1956-61, he appears to have taught in Roscommon, not Longford. Further, he
Joe identifies himself with an important public figure, constitutes an effort to evidence the significance of the life lived. However, the appeal to nationalist credentials upon which this strategy relies involves the assumption that both interviewer and interviewee share the same national political frame of reference. This assumption, apparent in Joe’s supposition that I ‘probably will have heard of him’, has been arrived at as a result of my own Northern Irish accent, which is here interpreted as a signifier of a shared national political identity, triggering and shaping Joe’s recollection of childhood in relation to nationalist themes.

This dynamic, in interaction with a particular code of Irish masculinity, has implications for how Joe remembers the Manchester bomb:

Barry: How did you feel walking round Manchester as an Irish person after that?
Joe: Well…(very long pause, sigh)…how did I feel? I felt bad that it had happened here in Manchester, I did feel bad about it, but then…. you have to realise, I had to realise then, that…(pause)…there’s peace now, Thank God, touch wood, in Northern Ireland… but at that time there wasn’t peace, …(pause)…and the …Catholic population in Ireland, at that time and for years before hand, never got fair play, that’s the way I look at that, from that point of view I have to speak, honestly what I feel, I mean I’ll give you a couple of incidents… on it…(pause)…Catholic people in Ireland, Northern Ireland, like I have to say, I have, I have my wife here and I have three sons right, if we were living in Northern Ireland at that time, four people in the house would be entitled to vote, but there was only one person allowed to vote, one person had, carried the vote…if you had the Protestant people next door, there could be four people living in that house; them four people had a vote. That was the way it was.401 I had a cousin ?, did have a cousin living in Armagh in Northern Ireland, and at that time she was living, blocks of houses each side of the street, but she was living on the right hand side of

appears to have been arrested in Cavan. If these facts are correct, the point regarding self-affirmation would be strengthened. See Robert W. White, Ruairí O Bradaigh: The Life and Politics of an Irish Revolutionary (Indiana University Press, Indiana, 2006).

401 Joe’s argument here concerning electoral discrimination in Northern Ireland is also subject to doubt. For although the unionist regime did engage in gerrymandering of local electoral boundaries, enabling them to secure a number of marginal constituencies between 1922 and 1969, religious discrimination did not exist with respect to the franchise, which was limited to owners or tenants of a dwelling and the spouses of such owners or tenants. True, this arrangement meant that lodgers and grown-up children living in the parental home could not vote. But the rule applied equally to Protestant and Catholic households, which meant in practice that the majority of those disenfranchised were Protestant, given Protestants’ greater numeric strength within the population. The scenario Joe describes, where two families living in different houses on the same street had different voting rights, was thus impossible. However, nationalist propaganda and civil rights activists in the 1960s constantly sought to make capital out of the ‘one man, one vote’ slogan, while the Cameron Report of 1969, whose findings were widely disseminated, affirmed the existence of gerrymandering practices at the local level. Joe’s story may be seen to run these two things together in a way that legitimates his own political stance and the identity being projected. On electoral discrimination see John Whyte, “How much discrimination was there under the unionist regime, 1921-68?” in Tom Gallagher and James O’Connell (eds.), Contemporary Irish Studies (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1983).
the street, the last house on the right hand side of the street, the rest of the houses all down that side were Protestant right, when she walked out her door she had to walk across the road, she couldn’t walk down the footpath, that is my feeling on it you know. Its brought, alright, a lot of bad things happened surely, and a lot of people lost their lives in it, people that shouldn’t have, both Protestant and Catholic, but, it had to be to bring peace, it was the only way, it was the only way forward, for to see peace, I mean, there’s people that’s against this what’s gone on like now with the settlement that’s gone on there now, but I’m not; I’m happy for to see peace, that’s all, you know, that I would say like, but I mean, that’s been goin’ on for three hundred years, you know, I’m sure you know a bit about the history of it anyway?

Barry: I know a wee bit…about…

Joe: I would say you do alright, you know, what part are you from yourself?

Barry: Ah, Cookstown, in Co. Tyrone

Joe: You’ll know, you’ll know about it…

Where Sean’s main memory of the Manchester bomb takes as its spatial referent the communal setting of a local pub, Joe seeks to frame his response here within an institutional mode of discourse, using the question as an opportunity to articulate an ideological position on Anglo-Irish relations, in effect to offer a nationalist justification for the bomb. Thus, where Sean tells of the anxieties he experienced through becoming the object of a suspicious gaze, Joe reads a question about ‘feelings’ as an invitation to express political ‘feelings’. In offering a justification for those feelings that potentially conflicts with the efforts of the authorities in Britain to proscribe support for Irish Republicanism during ‘The Troubles’, Joe may be viewed in this instance as implicitly reverting the gaze of British society.

In the 1970s and 80s, publically suggesting that IRA violence in Britain served a valid political purpose made one an object of suspicion, particularly if said with an Irish accent. For this reason, ‘official’ representatives of the ‘Irish community’, figures who often had substantial business interests in Britain, routinely sought to disassociate the ‘community’ from the activities of militant Republicanism. This did not automatically entail, however, the wholesale rarefaction of such ideas. As studies of the media during the period have suggested, the British state’s efforts to ‘Ulsterise’ the conflict from the mid 1970s involved an attempt to annex the issue from mainstream political discourse. But spaces always existed in British society where competing understandings of the conflict were circulated. Established in 1973, and developing out of links with earlier groups such as the Irish

402 Joe Doherty, p. 5.
Solidarity Campaign and the Anti-Internment League, perhaps the most visible exponent of anti-Imperialist rhetoric in the 1970s was the Troops Out Movement. Through public demonstrations and the production of a newspaper, throughout the period of ‘The Troubles’ the movement disseminated a view of conflict in Northern Ireland that ran counter to mainstream British efforts to criminalise it. According to a 1975 issue of Tom Tom, the bulletin of the movement:

Fifty years ago, Lloyd George issued an ultimatum to the Irish delegation at the Treaty negotiations: either accept the British Treaty terms, or face ‘immediate and terrible war’. It was the success of this threat, enabling Britain to partition Ireland and establish the sectarian Northern Ireland state based on Protestant privilege, that has directly resulted in the bitter fruits harvested over the past six years.404

In the 1980s, a decade in which the British Labour Party published its plans for Irish reunification ‘by consent’,405 the radicalisation of Irish activism that occurred in cities such as London involved the formation of groups that understood ‘anti-Irish racism’ as a function of the imperialist agenda condemned in publications such as Tom Tom (later renamed Troops Out of Ireland – Paper of the Troops Out Movement). For the Irish in Britain Representation Group, for example, established in 1984, ‘the primary function of the PTA [Prevention of Terrorism Act] was to silence and politically neutralise the Irish community in Britain’ with the result ‘that every Irish person was deemed suspect and guilty…’.406 As such, ‘anti-Irish racism has resulted from a history of colonisation and a policy of stripping Ireland of its resources and culture’.407 According to a 1986 ‘policy statement on Northern Ireland’:

The lives of Irish people living in Britain are underscored and structured by Britain’s relationship to Ireland and further recognize that this relationship has historically been one of intervention on the part of Britain. It is this intervention which has resulted in the situation in Ireland and the disadvantaged position of the Irish community in Britain.408

404 Tom Tom, November, 1975.
Thus, where figures such as Michael Forde anxiously backgrounded the historical context to ‘The Troubles’ in public statements, groups such as the IBRG actively sought to link the events of ‘The Troubles’ and ‘anti-Irish racism’ within the frame of a republican nationalist interpretation of Irish history, a practice which involved positioning the British state, rather than the IRA, as the aggressor. In contrast to the strategies of more conservative community leaders, groups such as the IBRG thus used historical narrative as a resource for active contestation of discrimination and the re-assertion of a militant Irish identity defined in opposition to British colonialism: the ‘struggle’ for ‘freedom’ in ‘Ireland’ morphs into the ‘struggle’ for identity and self-empowerment in Britain. Ultimately:

Our primary task is to liberate our own community, to build up, to agitate, to organise, to campaign, to educate, to finally see our community free from oppression. But we realise we can never be free whilst our sisters and brothers remain oppressed in the north of Ireland.409

Predictably, the views of groups such as the IBRG did not receive as much national media coverage as those of more conservative community representatives, but they did play a role in forcing official acknowledgement of the discrimination faced by Irish people, while the terms of their discourse echo through the literature on Irish identity and disadvantage that emerged into public space in the 1990s. More importantly here, they provide a subject-position through which Joe can articulate a version of national selfhood distinct from that constructed in Sean’s narrative.

Joe’s construction of this version of self within the interview, however, was not simply determined by the public availability of this subject-position, but was encouraged by the described inter-subjective interview relation: Joe’s interpretation of the word ‘feel’ is shaped by the assumption that I am interested in political ‘feelings’, an assumption itself based on a particular reading of my accent. This reading is apparently confirmed for Joe when I tell him, in response to his question, ‘what part’ I’m from.410 This confirms, in other words, Joe’s perception of the interview as a ‘safe’ space in which to express his views, and as providing an audience from which he can derive a sense of recognition for the version of self projected.

410 Tyrone is a majority Catholic and Sinn Fein county in Northern Ireland.
At the same time, however, the composure achieved through this process is not without its ambivalences. On the one hand, Joe’s justification of IRA tactics through reference to the victimisation of Catholics in Northern Ireland implicitly constructs the IRA as heroic defenders of ‘fair play’. In verbally defending the IRA, so Joe, who cogently deploys a number of rhetorical strategies and abstract formulations to authenticate and authorise his voice, also becomes a heroic defender of ‘fair play’. The stories and the way they are told here constitute elements of a gendered project of self-fashioning, expressive of an identification with ideals embodied in the figure of the Irish republican soldier. Yet the image of masculine certainty here projected is complicated by the deep pauses that punctuate the beginning of the response. These pauses, together with the admission that he ‘felt bad that it had happened here’, hint at an underlying complexity of emotions and attachments, backgrounded through Joe’s attempt to construct his memories of the bomb at the institutional level of discourse. Here, an aversion to emotional display appears to shape Joe’s narrative strategy: if the militant discourse taken up permits access to a heroic version of masculinity, the concomitant focus on the abstract and general permits a backgrounding of anxieties that might otherwise disrupt the image of authoritative, controlled masculinity Joe wishes to project.

Other responses made by Joe provide a deeper understanding of the emotional processes that threaten this image:

Well it was, it was.. it was a hard time for the Irish people like, I can’t say, like, that.. that I ever encountered anything bad, they said to me about it, but, you see here in Manchester we’re lucky, the community, I’m involved like in the Irish community in a lot of ways and we’ve a great relationship with Manchester Town Hall, the night of the bombing here all the Councillors from Manchester Town Hall they came up to the Centre, you know…

As Joe here suggests, the ‘Irish community’ in Manchester views itself as having ‘a great relationship with Manchester Town Hall’. Many local councillors come from Irish families and, as Joe recalls, only hours after the Manchester bomb the Irish centre at Cheetham Hill received a visit from local councillors, including Richard Leese, then leader of the city

411 Joe Doherty, p. 5.
council, to offer support. In recalling this memory through the collective ‘we’, however, Joe shifts to a different subject-position, inviting recognition of a different form of masculine status. If in the previous extract Joe seeks to identify himself with a heroic image of politicised Irish masculinity, here and elsewhere in his narrative he identifies himself with ‘the Irish people in Manchester’, and more specifically, with ‘Irish community’ leadership and ‘the councillors from Manchester town hall’.

Joe’s effort to identify himself as a local community leader here refers us back to the details of his settlement touched upon in chapter three. As we have seen, in his narrative as a whole Joe sought to construct his migration to and settlement in England as a story of personal success and achievement. In the first instance, this had to do with how his earnings as a tunnel digger within the construction industry had afforded him a degree of affluence, enabling him to buy a house and raise a family in Manchester. In later years, however, the heavy nature of the work Joe performed to secure this material success has taken its toll on his body, such that he is ‘crippled up today’. In the interview, in the face of the threat these facts posed to the image of masculine achievement Joe wished to project, Joe sought to bolster his preferred migration success story through reference to what he viewed as his prominent position within the local Irish community, whose official institutions he appears to have become increasingly involved with following his retirement, but also by denigrating aspects of Britishness, which he implicitly viewed as responsible for his ‘crippled up’ bodily state. Joe’s work experiences in England have thus engendered a certain antipathy towards British institutions which have sanctioned his exploitation as a labourer, but also a emotional investment in the public of the local Irish community, this being a space where he can affirm a sense of personal distinction and belonging.

The Manchester bomb brings the different impulses and identifications engendered through these work experiences into conflict. The reason why, as Joe states above, he ‘felt bad that it had happened here’ was because the Manchester bomb brings into sharp focus a conflict between his ideological sympathy for the IRA’s cause and a counter-posed sense of belonging to ‘the Irish people in Manchester’, a construction which incorporates both ‘Irish’

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412 Christopher Elliott, ‘Manchester’s Irish brush off the verbal backlash but feel the sorrow’, *The Guardian*, June 17, 1996.
413 Joe Doherty, p. 15.
and ‘Manchester’. Not only, as we have seen, did public figures and Irish community leaders portray the Irish community as victims of the IRA’s tactics after the bomb, but when the IBRG invited a Sinn Fein councillor to speak at a pre-election meeting in the city less than a year after the attack, local councillors expressed condemnation, constructing Sinn Fein as representatives of the IRA. Amongst them was council leader Richard Leese, who took particular offence over the IBRG’s refusal to include the Manchester bomb on the agenda for discussion at the meeting:

Any visit by a Sinn Fein representative should be on the basis they apologise for the attack on the people of Manchester that took place and a pledge that no attack will ever take place again…To come to the city and not even mention the attack is outrageous and a slur on all people, including those of Irish origin.

The version of self Joe wishes to project through his narrative thus depends upon the performance of two roles ideologically opposed within public discourse: the determined Irish republican, and the local community leader who is well integrated into local circuits of civic power. In contrast to Sean or public representatives of the IBRG, Joe cannot negotiate this tension through a strategy of projective disavowal, shifting the anxiety generated onto another object, without destabilising other parts of the self. If the IRA are disavowed as culpable, Joe’s self-image as an ‘Irishman’ within the interview is de-stabilised; if, by contrast, the British authorities are positioned in this role, the sense of status and belonging Joe derives from his ‘great relationship’ with ‘Manchester Town Hall’ comes under threat. Joe’s strategy for negotiating the conflict in the interview thus involves an attempt to diminish its seriousness while creating an emotional distance between the event of the bomb and his personal feelings and experiences. Thus, the bomb ‘was a hard time for the Irish people’ but ‘I can’t say, like, that…that I ever encountered anything bad’.

As it turns out, this claim was not wholly accurate. Later, in a separate discussion about how Irish people were received in England more generally, Joe suddenly remembers that the police came to his house to investigate a possible link with terrorist activities one Christmas morning, a monitoring practice many Irish people in Britain were subject to during the period of ‘The Troubles’:

Barry: Was there any trouble with the police over here ever or anything like that?

Joe: I have never any trouble with them, they came here once, oh Christ aye, they did yeah, they came here once

Barry: What was that about?

Joe: They came here because somebody they had, they had a report that I had some guns in the house, I said, went to the door, ‘can we come in’, course you can, what’s it about? He said ‘do you have guns in the house?’, It had just come Christmas time you know, ‘Jesus!’ I said, ‘there’s a reek of guns’ I said, ‘here, surely to Christ there is, come in to the front room to you see them’, and the kids, ‘all flaming kids stuff!’ I said, ‘there’s no guns in this house’, you know, they never even searched.

Barry: And why do you think they came?

Joe: I don’t know, I think mebbe some…somebody could have, with me being Irish, someone could have just reported me, they never said, they just said they had a report..so, I says to them, like, at the door, before I let them in, well I says, lads, I said, I hope, I said, that you can substantiate what you’re saying, because, I said, there’s no guns here, I invited them in…the kids playtoys…

Barry: How did you feel about that, about them comin’ round after Christmas

Joe: Well, I didn’t feel…I didn’t feel great about it, but then I thought to myself, well, I had nothin’ to hide, and then…it come into my mind, that they were doing’ their job, they got a report

Joe’s recollection of this experience of coming under suspicion contrasts sharply with how Sean remembers encountering hostility in his local pub after the Manchester bomb. For Sean, the bomb and ‘The Troubles’ more generally constituted events in relation to which he actively expressed a sense of victimisation. Such feelings were inextricably linked to an active process of memory whereby distinct experiences blurred into a general, collective memory of the ‘The Troubles’ as a period of being under suspicion. By contrast, Joe has not only kept distinct events separate in his memory; he also appears to have actively forgotten events where he was the direct target of a suspicious gaze. The memory Joe here recounts concerning the police appears to emerge spontaneously, as if the question about the police uncovers an experience that has been layered over with other, preferred memories of the period.

In keeping with the interpretation developed above, one explanation for the repression of such experiences within Joe’s narrative is that they potentially undermine the versions of self he wishes to project within the interview. On the one hand, the irresistible invasion of

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416 ‘reek’ here means ‘many’ or ‘a lot of’, rather than referring to smell.
417 Joe Doherty, p. 12.
the state’s surveillance apparatus into the private space of the home on Christmas morning, in full view of family, negates Joe’s status within that context: Joe is no longer master in his own home. On the other, the police’s visit to Joe’s house, occurring in full view of neighbours on Christmas day, potentially criminalise Joe in the eyes of the community. This calls into question his proclaimed ‘great relationship’ with Manchester Town Hall, and with it the self-image of migration success this ‘great relationship’ serves to protect from the emasculating effects of the de-habilitating injuries Joe sustained within the construction industry. As an experience which undermines different parts of the self simultaneously, Joe’s visit from the police is thus difficult to negotiate, suggesting an explanation as to why it has been forgotten over time.

A different way of putting this is that Joe has difficulty locating a subject-position which enables him to make sense of and express how he experienced the event. In Sean’s narrative, he was able to see himself as a victim, in the first instance of local hostility, in the last of the irresponsible tactics of the IRA. For Joe, however, this narrative conflicts with his professed support for Republicanism. Nor, however, can he comfortably condemn the actions of the British authorities, given his projected respectability and closeness to civic authority. Establishing emotional distance between the event and the narrating self thus becomes the preferred strategy for managing the tensions generated through the experience.

This underpins the initial forgetting of the event, but also the form of the memory when it is recounted. Hence Joe’s use of irony in telling a story whose central feature is a wry incongruity between ‘guns’ and ‘children’s toys’, a narrative strategy that creates emotional distance through diminishing the seriousness of the intrusion while enabling Joe to present himself as unperturbed and in control of the situation. Similarly, when Joe is invited to describe his feelings an understated acknowledgement that ‘I didn’t feel great about it’ is quickly rationalised away in terms of a masculine imperative that, by framing the incident within the semantic field of work, permits empathy with the ‘lads’: ‘they were doing their job’. In these instances, as in Joe’s memories of ‘The Troubles’ more generally, conflicting identifications based on gender, belonging and the interview relation intersect to encourage a strategy of emotional management that centres on deflection and aversion in order to preserve an impermeable image of self.
In the narrative of my third respondent, the memory produced as a result of such interactions takes a different form again. Born 1941, the second daughter in a small farming family, Kate migrated from Sligo to Manchester in 1961, aged 20, to take up work as a general nurse in Manchester infirmary.\textsuperscript{418} Like Sean, Kate’s memories of interactions with English people during this early phase of settlement were positive. In response to questions about her early impressions of English people, Kate recalled how ‘I found them very…funny. We always used to have great laughs.’\textsuperscript{419} This characterisation, as Kate explained, was based on memories of going dancing with English men when she was single and working as a nurse in Stockport between 1962 and 64, the central theme of which was mutual affection:

They did, they loved to be with the Irish. Er, they all... “When are we going? When are we going again to the dance? When are we going to meet your friends? When are we... er...” you know, and all that. But the... I liked it, I did like the English, and I do, and I’ve worked with a lot of English people.\textsuperscript{420}

The onset of ‘The Troubles’, by which time Kate was married with twins, marked a change in this relation of mutual affection, however:

Ooh... I used to... I used to try and, and erm... calm down my v... my accent. Or say, don’t tell... you know, tell them... Now the Jews were alright. It was the English. They hate... especially, erm... now, when we lived in Park Hill Avenue there was a woman across the road. There was two families. One was English, and one was Irish. They were, erm, from Donegal. And, erm... er... so the Irish ones were alright, but this... and the Irish ones had a son. And he er... was over in Aberdeen. You know, over in there were... er, the... England had their m... their base. He was over there and he was in the English army. And the other woman, she was Scotch, and her son was in the army. And he was sent to Northern Ireland. Oh! Well I had to keep my door shut. Oh dear. And I used to say to Pat, “Don’t say a word when you’re going out! Jump into the van and go! Because,” I said... because I knew him. He’d, he’d eff her off and all that type of thing. Oh and I used to... and... she used to come over, you know when the Troubles started? The Troubles started, she used to... she’d come over. And she’d say to me... she’d say, “If my son... If them IRA or so and so’s,” she said, “touch a hair on my son’s head,” she said, “I’ll be over here for you.” Oh! Oh, well I... and

\textsuperscript{418} Kate Daly, p. 12.  
\textsuperscript{419} Kate Daly, p. 36.  
\textsuperscript{420} Kate Daly, p. 37.
I... well, we had to keep our mouths shut. I couldn’t... I couldn’t speak much, because people then knew was Irish.  

Reproducing many of the features of Sean’s memory, Kate here recalls an experience of ‘coming under suspicion’, of having ‘to keep our mouths shut’ in order to conceal verbal signifiers of Irishness. As a result, just as Sean had to avoid his local pub, Kate had to ‘keep my door shut’, suggesting how for both the tensions generated through ‘The Troubles’ worked to separate them from communal spaces where English and Irish mixed. Where Kate’s memory differs from Sean’s is in its spatial referent: where Sean’s memories of ‘coming under suspicion’ referred to the masculine space of the pub, Kate ‘shuts her door’ on her local neighbourhood, solidifying the boundary separating the interior of the home from the communal space of the neighbourhood. Where Sean recalls estrangement from a communal space of leisure and sociability, Kate thus recalls being penned within her home, encircled by the hostile gaze of neighbours as her husband exits the scene.

As Kate went on explain, such neighbourhood hostilities tended to increase ‘specially when there was a bomb’. Following the Manchester bomb in particular, Kate feared for the physical safety of her children ‘because they might attack them’:

You know, oh God, Manchester. Oh... oh...had to hide me, and the kids, I had to keep them in, and I had to keep them, keep their mouth shut, and not say anything, you know. Because they might attack them. In the... you know, they were, er, Irish, of Irish parents you see.  

This memory contains two factual inaccuracies, revealing, as in Sean’s case, the effects of a memory process whereby collective constructions of the Irish suspectee appear to have reshaped personal experience in particular ways. Firstly, given that Kate’s children were born and raised in Manchester, and so would have had English accents, it does not make literal sense for Kate to have kept her children’s ‘mouth shut’ following the bomb. Secondly, as the bomb was in 1996, all her children would have been adults at the time; some, possibly all, may not even have been living at home. The suggestion, as in Sean’s case, is that earlier,

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421 Kate Daly, pp. 69-70.
422 Kate Daly, p. 71.
emotionally significant experiences of ‘coming under suspicion’, when Kate’s children were young and under her daily care, have come to define her memory of ‘The Troubles’ as a whole. Facilitated by the circulation of generalised images of Irish victimisation within public space from the 1990s, this process has encouraged the forgetting of the specificity of individual events, such that all instances of ‘coming under suspicion’ associated with the memory frame of ‘The Troubles’ blur, in effect, into the one definitive experience.

This renders specific details of Kate’s memory of the Manchester bomb factually suspect, but it also permits insight into what ‘The Troubles’, as a key period/event within her experiences of settlement in England, means to her. In this respect, one of the ways Kate’s congealed memory of ‘The Troubles’ differs from that of Sean’s concerns how her embodied experience of ‘coming under suspicion’ has been shaped by discourses of femininity which identify women with maternity and the care of children within the home. Kate’s memory of the Manchester bomb recalls her within the home, in the role of protective mother, worrying about the safety of her children and taking steps to preserve it. This suggests how the effects of hostility were experienced relationally for Kate, as affecting emotionally significant others within an inter-subjective sense of self, but also how such occasions could provide opportunities to realise idealised images of the ‘good mother’.

A second important way in which Kate’s memories differed from Sean’s concerns their relation with institutional modes of discourse. As we explore further Kate’s memories of the Manchester bomb, an important difference emerged in relation to her presentation of the IRA:

**Barry:** What ha... what happened after that?

**Kate:** Erm, it... well they kept at... they kept going about it, you know, “Oh the Irish!” And... the... you know, “You’re so and so’s,” and all that. “And the IRA are, so you could belong to the IRA, and you could be helping the IRA, and you could be doing thi... You could be doing that, and you could be doing...” And I... and I said, “Look, I...” I said, “I am not... I’m as against it as you are.” I said, “I don’t like it anymore than you do. But,” I said, “the way the IRA are sucking at it, is the English people are over there, in our... co... in our pla... in our Ireland.”

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Kate Daly, p. 71. The phrase ‘the way the IRA are sucking at it’ may be read as ‘the way the IRA are approaching it and deriving meaning from it’.
Kate here recalls how she sought to distance herself from the aims and activities of the IRA in the face of prevalent suspicions, protesting that ‘I’m as against it as you are’. In constructing a subject-position inhabitable by both accuser and accused in opposition to the IRA’s violence, such a formulation replicates the strategy of disassociation deployed by community leaders and Sean. However, this effort to collapse differences between ‘English’ and ‘Irish’ in relation to the IRA is immediately complicated by Kate’s effort to explain ‘the way the IRA are sucking at it’ which, by re-introducing history, re-establishes the opposition between ‘English people’ and ‘our Ireland’. Here, after finally locating the term that best expresses her understanding, Kate manages to verbalise a resistance to the accusatory voice interrogating the self in the historical present. The memory thus un-mutes a sense of sympathy for the IRA’s political aims, revealing in the process how Kate’s understanding of ‘The Troubles’ at the level of institutional politics is framed in traditional nationalist terms: the phrase ‘our Ireland’ constructs the conflict as a territorial competition between ‘the English people’ and the Irish; the state of Northern Ireland or the role of the majority population within that state do not figure. As such, at this point, Kate inhabits a subject-position closer to that taken up by Joe in response to the bomb.

However, as Kate’s vacillations, from condemnation of the IRA to recognition of its aims, suggests, her habitation of this subject-position was not steadily fixed. A little further on, as Kate pondered the issue of ‘peace’ and the ceasefire, the reasons for this ambivalence became clearer:

You know, if the peace has got a chance. I was so pleased about that. About the way... but I think what do you call thems are very, very clever men. Gerry Adams. And I think he speaks so well. And I’ve watched him on telly, and no matter who tries to fluster him, or cajole him, or anything, and he sits there, and he’s... so good, and he speaks so well, I think, ‘God, he’s an educated man.’ Er, but I didn’t believe in what they were doing. But... but then there was this programme on the radio saying they’re going to pull the troops out. And I, I’m thinking to myself, “Well that’s good.” I mean we d... if that got peace, and er, peace is to have a chance, well why not take them out? And this is what they’re doing. They’re killing. And I think that’s awful. That really is. I really do... And I was so pleased that they did, Gerry Adams, and Martin McGuinness and all the others came out, and did... condoned what they had done. You know, they said, well, “We... we don’t belie... we don’t want it,
and we don’t... it’s not us.” But it’s part of them, isn’t it? But I think there’s probably be, always be somebody won’t want peace.424

Revealing a new dimension to the effects of gender in her account, in Kate’s story Gerry Adams here appears as an object of projective idealisation, a father figure embodying traits of wisdom, composure and determination.425 Such idealisation not only evokes a sense of national pride, but helps fortify Kate against personal feelings of powerlessness. ‘But’, as Kate reiterates, ‘I didn’t believe in what they were doing’ because ‘they’re killing’. If in the previous extract the self is envisioned in conflicted dialogue with an accusatory ‘they’, struggling to justify itself in the glare of a suspicious gaze, it is now caught up in a different conversation about the moral acceptability of political violence, one that complicates Kate’s identification with the image of empowered Irishness projected by Gerry Adams. The opposing positions taken up by Kate in the previous extract here appear to be underpinned by tension between a gendered form of identification with an empowering symbol of militant Irishness and the internalised prescriptions of a religious moral code that prohibits ‘killing’.

Kate attempts to resolve this tension through investment in the idea of ‘peace’: she was ‘so pleased’ when Sinn Fein agreed to ‘take the troops out’ and ‘condemned what they had done’ because this potentially enables a splitting-off of their problematic association with violence. In the last instance, however, Kate is unsure about whether repentance will deliver redemption, whether the IRA can ever be rehabilitated as permissible objects of admiration. Rather, what ‘they had done’ remains ‘part of them’. Investment in ‘peace’ thus ultimately produces an uncertain closure: ‘I think there’s probably be, always be somebody won’t want peace’

424 Kate Daly, pp. 72-73.
425 Gerry Adams and Martin McGuiness, initially prominent figures within the PIRA in the 1970s, became the main figures within the leadership of Provisional Sinn Fein from the 1980s as the republican movement adopted the ‘bullet and the ballot-box’ strategy. In July 2005 the PIRA announced an end to their armed struggle and completed arms decommissioning under the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in September of the same year.
Conclusion: rethinking ‘The Troubles’ and ‘Irish identity’

Within the recent historiography on the Irish in Britain, the period of ‘The Troubles’ is often seen to have reinforced the ‘invisibility’ of the Irish community in Britain. Implicit in this trope is the idea that ‘Irish identity’ became subject to ‘repression’, a concept signalling an understanding of discriminatory practice as separate from and opposed to the formation of Irish subjectivities. By contrast, this chapter has tried to explore how migrant subjectivities are constituted through such discourses and practices. Approaching the Manchester bomb as a contested site of memory, around which a differentiated set of narratives have been woven by different actors, it has investigated the interplay between discourse and psychic interiority in the personal memories of three respondents who experienced the aftermath of the attack first hand.

Focusing on this interplay has enabled a number of insights. Most obviously, a focus on what Alessandro Portelli calls ‘the shuttlework of oral narrative’, where ‘events exist simultaneously in the gestalt of memory’, has revealed how, for my three respondents, the Manchester bomb functions as an event around which their personal feelings about ‘The Troubles’ as a whole congeal. In itself, this observation is important for understanding the particularity of how the cultural memory of the Irish in Manchester has been shaped by ‘The Troubles’. More generally, however, close analysis of how this process of congealment is mediated by discourse makes visible the path of a cultural circuit through which personal experiences generated at the local and private level re-enter, particularly in the 1990s, mainstream British culture, becoming in turn appropriated by individuals engaged in reconstructing their personal experiences in the present. The particularities of how this circuit works, in short, are central to understanding how Irish people themselves make sense of ‘The Troubles’. It follows that institutional discourses on ‘discrimination’, ‘invisibility’ and ‘suspicion’ must themselves be understood as shaped and produced within the context of ‘The Troubles’, and as forming part of the repertoire of discursive forms available to individuals for self-construction. Tropes such as ‘discrimination’, ‘invisibility’ and ‘suspicion’ do not merely describe Irish people’s experience; they are implicated in its construction, creating both silences and spaces from which to speak.
As well as highlighting the mediating role of discourse, attention to how personal memory production is underpinned by an attempt to psychically integrate the self, to achieve subjective composure, makes apparent how, for Joe and Sean, remembering ‘The Troubles’ brought different parts of the self into conflict. Memories of ‘The Troubles’ do not unsettle and discompose merely because they recall experiences of being othered, but because they disturb the unsteady alignment of ‘here’ and ‘there’ within migrant subjectivity through bringing issues of otherness, belonging, and national and political loyalties together in contradictory ways. Both respondents had spent most of their adult lives in England and had formed various kinds of identification and attachment with their places of settlement. Yet both also continued to identify themselves as ‘Irish’, albeit in different ways, with reference to different versions of this formation. ‘The Troubles’ dramatised a conflict between these competing forms of identification and belonging, which both negotiated in different ways.

For Sean, ‘coming under suspicion’ was remembered in terms of ‘embarrassment’ and exclusions from familiar local spaces, which constituted important sites of belonging within his narrative. ‘The Troubles’ thus disrupted a hybrid identity that incorporated identifications with a particular conservative Catholic Irishness and local community spaces where the majority population was English. The conservative narrative through which Sean understood his experiences provided a means of negotiating this conflict through the way it projected responsibility for divisive events onto the perpetrators of the bomb. Making use of this formulation, Sean sought to disassociate his own Irish identity from the violence of the PIRA, creating the possibility of a re-alignment between the categories ‘English’ and ‘Irish’ through the construction of a shared subject-position of victimisation. An effect of the internalisation of this understanding, which anxiously disavowed comprehension of the PIRA’s motivations, however, was that talk of politics was tightly circumscribed: the narrative inculcated a kind of taboo concerning the IRA, producing a particular kind of silence within Sean’s account.

Joe’s narrative did not evidence the effects of this particular taboo, in part because he recalled his experiences through two competing constructions simultaneously. By taking-up at different points the subject-position provided by a more militant, nationalistic discourse on ‘The Troubles’, Joe was able to locate his experiences within a broader political and historical framework, creating possibilities for the contestation of dominant British
discourses. However, the splitting of ‘Irish’ and ‘English’ upon which these strategies and performances were premised tended to be destabilised at precisely the points where dualities of belonging were tacitly or explicitly recognised. Viewed thus, locating one’s experiences within the militant construction, in a context of competing understandings, could enhance in distinctive ways the conflict of belongings dramatised by ‘The Troubles’. Where Sean’s narrative tends to be orientated towards the restoration of harmony between multiple objects of belonging, a tendency facilitated by the code of identity governing the script ‘taken up’, Joe’s sense of belonging is potentially more sharply split, in part because the code of Irishness expressed through the militant script is constituted through opposition to ideas of Britishness. This tends to resonate with the splitting effects of anti-Irish stereotypes, entailing that multiple belongings become oppositional and mutually exclusive rather than reconcilable: different parts of the self are set in opposition to one another. Hence the more de-centred character of Joe’s narrative, as he shifts back and forth, to and from discursively split subject-positions without ultimately arriving at a point of closure.

For Joe, such tensions tended to be reinforced by the effects of gender. The tension within Joe’s narrative between sympathy for republican motivations and a sense of belonging focused on the Irish public in Manchester was mediated through ideological contradictions relating to competing images of masculine self, one that consecrates the deployment of violence in the service of national ideals as the ultimate criterion of Irish manhood, and one based on the ‘democratic’ values projected through modern British civic culture. Put differently, tensions between competing versions of masculinity overlapped with tensions between competing subject-positions within the particular public of Irish associational culture. In turn, the tensions resulting from this conflict are dealt with in a highly gendered way, in keeping with masculine prohibitions against emotional display. Viewed as the effects of gendered forms of emotional disciplining, silences within Joe’s account can be seen as having to do with the disciplinary function of codes of masculinity operating in interaction with the conflicts of belonging dramatised by ‘The Troubles’. This contrasts with the silences in Sean’s narrative, which have to do with the public disavowal of republican violence within conservative community narratives.

Kate’s memory of the bomb both shared features with and differed from Sean’s and Joe’s narratives. In common with Sean, Kate recalled the aftermath of the bomb as a period when
her Irishness rendered her an object of suspicion, creating tensions between English and Irish people in contrast with earlier experiences, when relations between the two groups were recalled in harmonious terms. In contrast with Sean, but in common with Joe, Kate negotiated this suspicious gaze in two different ways simultaneously, disavowing the IRA’s tactics one moment, rationalising them the next through reference to a nationalist understanding of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Where Kate’s narrative diverges most clearly on these different points of commonality with Sean’s and Joe’s accounts is in relation to the effects of gender. While both Sean and Kate recall the bomb as an experience of coming under suspicion, in Kate’s case she is envisioned as enclosed within her home, in the role of protective mother, worrying about the safety of her children and taking steps to preserve it. In this respect, Kate’s narrative is suggestive of how the very form and themes of one’s experience of being othered could be affected by the way gender regulates one’s position within social space while shaping one’s relationships with others.

In a different way, gender worked to differentiate the way in which memories of the bomb created tensions between different parts of the self. For Joe, the tensions between his articulation of support for the IRA’s aims and his identification with the local Irish community were underpinned by attempts to affirm the status of the self within the interview, a strategy of composure which was itself conditioned Joe’s experiences of work within the construction industry. For Kate, gender prescriptions also tended to reinforce the conflict of belongings dramatised by ‘The Troubles’, but in contrast to Joe this took the form of a moral dilemma between admiration for the seductive image of power projected by steadfast republican leaders, and repulsion at the consequences of the violence these same men were responsible for. This dilemma can be seen as an effect of internal contradictions within a code of Irish Catholic femininity which inculcates reverence for particular kinds of ‘fathers of the nation’ and the national ideals they embody, at the same time that it condemns violence, indeed identifies femininity with sympathy for the victims of violence. In sharp contrast to Sean and Joe, both of whom, in different ways, background the contradictions and silences of their narratives through the projection of an image of certainty, Kate’s memory ultimately takes the form of a moral self-examination, where the
self tries to puzzle-out which of its competing understandings and impulses is morally correct.

In the last instance, then, it is perhaps this distinctiveness in how subjects negotiate memories of the bomb that reveals most about the relationship between subjectivity and suspicion. How subjects’ remembered the bomb, the meanings they attached to it and the versions of identity they projected in relation to it, was shaped by a complex interaction between discourse, psychic interiority and the accretion of past experience, the form of which was individually specific, yet was conditioned by an horizon of imaginative possibilities the limits for which were set by the broader context of migration to post-1945 Britain. This suggests that, while technologies of suspicion may have targeted Irish people as a group during ‘The Troubles’, it does not automatically follow that ‘Irish identity’ was affected in a uniform way. Given the specificity of individuals’ lives and the variety of discursive options available, the possibilities for subject-formation were diverse. On this reading, a central theme of future research in this area concerns the complex diversity of the forms of Irish migrant subjectivity produced during this crucial period in the history of the Irish in Britain.
Conclusion: the migrant self in conversation

Migrancy, ‘identity’ and discursive mediation

If present-day immigration remains one of the most contentious issues in contemporary British politics, mass post-war immigration has become a leitmotif of twentieth century British cultural memory. Visible in TV adverts and popular drama, historical documentaries and film, contemporary efforts to represent the post-war era feature immigration prominently as an iconic if deeply fraught moment in the development of the post-imperial nation. Excepting the occasional reference to ‘no blacks, no dogs, no Irish’ signs posted in bedsit windows, such efforts to weave the imagery of post-war immigration into contemporary national mythology have typically ignored the presence of Irish migrants in post-war Britain, as they have the whole gamut of migrant groups who do not fit the profile of ‘coloured’ immigration. This was strikingly apparent in the version of modern British experience staged through the recent opening ceremony for London 2012, entitled ‘Isles of Wonder’. Danny Boyle’s dramatic and highly pyrotechnic rendering of the modern nation amplified the theme of multiculturalism in its representation of post-1945 British popular culture. But its representation of post-war ‘new arrivals’ predictably reproduced the Empire Windrush motif.

Historians of the Irish in Britain have offered opposing interpretations for their absence from various forms of national remembering. On the one side, the ‘assimilationists’ argue that the Irish have assimilated rapidly within British culture since the end of the nineteenth century. Because the Irish and the British are so similar, having a past and skin colour in common, the Irish are treated as ‘the same’ in Britain, such that they do not register as a bona fide ‘ethnic minority’ compared to black and Asian groups who arrived in the post-war decades. On the other, ‘invisibilists’ or ‘ethnicists’ have argued that the Irish do not appear within the story of the multicultural nation because the British state, through the mechanism of the Catholic Church, have sought to de-nationalise and incorporate the Irish in Britain.

reality and all along, however, the Irish have been an ‘ethnic minority’, suffering forms of racism and discrimination hidden from view through the exclusion of the Irish from the dominant discourse on immigration. The story of the Irish in Britain has thus been the story of a minority group’s struggle to assert its identity, to become ‘visible’ within national culture.

This thesis has not attempted to substantiate one or the other of these theses. Indeed, it is difficult to envisage a definite conclusion to this debate since evidence mobilised in support of one position is counterbalanced by irreconcilably contradictory evidence in support of the other. Rather, this thesis has tended to argue that the debate as a whole wrongly presupposes a unitary solution, an effect of problematic assumptions about the nature of migrant ‘identity’. Whether theorised as an originary or social essence, identity is implicitly viewed as a thing, a possession or attribute which may be protected or preserved, eradicated or lost through moving to a new place, through settling in a new culture. By contrast, this thesis has approached ‘identity’ as an ongoing yet historically and socially specific process, involving reference to multiple publics and spaces simultaneously, and as working in and through discourse in un-predetermined ways, rather than against or outside of it. The thesis has explored the diverse ways individual migrant subjectivities are constituted in and through the migration process, through migrants’ conversations with the multiple worlds they inhabit, past and present, there and here.

This exploration suggests that migrant experiences resist simple incorporation within an assimilation/ethnic identity dichotomy. The subjectivities analysed over the course of the previous four chapters were not coherently constituted or unified (or negated) through a single discourse on identity; rather, there were always multiple, often contradictory, possibilities available for self-construction within the different spaces migrants inhabited. Even where individual migrants share the same country of origin, are members of the same church, share a similar trajectory of social mobility, and encounter the same structures of discrimination or inclusion, it does not follow that such individuals axiomatically ‘have’ the same ‘experience’. This is because the meaning of experience is neither the product of rational perception nor intrinsic to social context. As Miguel Cabrera puts it:
If social reality does not constitute an objective structure, then people’s identities cannot be the expression of their social position. If meaning is about an interaction between social reality and an inherited categorical matrix then a ‘meaning-filled’ entity like identity is also forged as the result of the interplay between social or real position and the discursive social imaginary.\footnote{M. Cabrera, Post-Social History: An Introduction (New York, 2001), p. 71.}

In both the ‘assimilation’ and ‘invisibility’ theses the unreflexive deployment of a categorical subject-status, the Irish in Britain, has tended to mask the diverse forms this interplay between social position and discursive social imaginary could take. In relation to the four sites of memory examined in this thesis, migrants ‘took up’ and negotiated a range of different subject-positions, embedded within discourses which objectified the realities of settlement in post-1945 Britain in a variety of ways, according to a range of ideals and teleologies. Multidimensional and multilocated migrant subjectivities were conditioned by the possibilities and constraints of a shifting mosaic of local, communal and institutional forms which mediated the everyday realities of migration and were available in the present for self-construction.

This spells problems for the idea of a unified Irish experience and concepts which depend upon properties of boundedness for their analytic purchase. The notion of assimilation assumes that criteria such as inter-marriage, occupation and mobility provide objective evidence of the acquisition of a new identity. But there is no necessary connection between context and identity; migrants’ experiences of work, family and class position were mediated by a range of subject-positions such that identifications were never uniform and one-way. While migrants’ interactions with the spaces they inhabit are part of the processual nature of subjectivity, this does not justify inserting Irish migrants’ experiences into a linear story of transformation. Throughout their lives migrants continued to position themselves in ways that suggested multiple identifications with multiple sites of belonging.

The diverse character of migrants’ self-positionings also suggests the need to refine what is meant by the existence of an ‘Irish community’ in Britain. In a critique of the arguments of David Fitzpatrick and Sheridan Gilley, Mary Hickman has made the claim that the existence of ‘community’ is not dependent on degrees of internal differentiation or the spatial
dispersal of the migrant population. Instead, she stresses the importance of ‘creative consciousness’ and ‘the system of representation of the imagined community of the Irish in Britain’. Within this formulation ‘community’ signifies ‘a sense of belonging’ and ‘a particular set of values and norms in everyday life: mutuality, co-operation, identification, symbiosis’. The source of these values ‘is provided by the imagined community of the ‘nation’ to which they [migrants] feel they belong’. Drawing on Benedict Anderson, she explains that:

The nationalist myth elevates to a birthright the fantasy of being rooted. For all those who are displaced by migration (frequently forced and structural) or who are refugees, the search for roots becomes inevitable and often, depending on the context, this can be a poignant and difficult search to accommodate. In this sense then we can say that the notion of the Irish community in Britain is a myth – it is a myth in just the same way that all nations, or ethnicities, as imagined communities, are based on myth and all migrant groups live the contradictions of maintaining or not maintaining that myth in the diaspora.428

Such a view seems to slip and slide between weak and strong definitions of ‘community’. On one reading, ‘community’ appears to be interchangeable with ‘myth’: the very imagining of ‘community’ is enough to bring it into being while ‘community’ can support endless differentiation without threat to its coherency. Indeed, migrants do not even need to subscribe to the myth of the community for it to exist and to be included within it. The obvious problem with such a conception is its excessive elasticity. If the existence of ‘community’ is synonymous with its discursive imagining, communities begin to proliferate everywhere, to the point where it becomes impossible to distinguish between what is or is not a community. A corollary of this is that it becomes difficult to say who is inside or outside a community. Boundedness, however, would seem to be a necessary condition of ‘community’: a community without boundaries, that does not distinguish one group of people from another, is no community at all.

In fact, this superficially weak formulation contains within it a much stronger claim, designed to supply the requisite property of boundedness. The notions of myth and the imagined community enable Hickman to circumnavigate Fitzpatrick’s concerns about

geographical dispersion and a lack of internal coherence, but the notions are deployed on the basis of deterministic assumptions about the intrinsic meaning of migrancy deriving from having left a ‘homeland’. Whether they like it or not, all migrants are ‘inevitably’ part of the community of migrants because they are migrants: the social fact of migration becomes the basis of a shared identity which in theory constitutes community. Within this conception difference is merely a variation on a dominant theme that marks the boundaries between inside and outside:

Evidence of different representations of Irishness in Britain being relevant to recent migrants does not necessarily negate the idea of ‘community’. The point is that ‘community’ is highly symbolised with the consequence that members of the community can invest it with their very often different selves. Its character is sufficiently malleable that it can accommodate all members’ selves. The whole system of the imagined community which divides the world between ‘you’ and ‘them’ is maintained by a system of symbolic ‘border guards’. These border guards are used as shared cultural resources with shared collective positioning vis-à-vis other collectivities.429

Such an argument is circular. For migrants to invest the community with their ‘different selves’, the community must already exist. But it is through the processes of investing in social imaginaries that ‘identities’ or ‘communities’ come into play. The crucial point is that such processes do not necessarily yield ‘identity’ or its manifestation as ‘community’. In this thesis migrants’ belongings and self-positionings were not governed by an over-arching ‘system of symbolic border guards’ marking the boundaries of an ‘Irish community’, even if subjects made investments in various discursive imaginings of Irish experience in Britain. Indeed, even if subjects’ had identified themselves explicitly with such a community, would this have constituted evidence of the social existence of a bounded collectivity, or of identification within an imagined object? Indeed, given the inherently processual and highly differentiated nature of identification, it is difficult to see how similar patterns of self-positioning, even when focused on an imagined community, ever aggregate into the actual compound ‘community’. If ‘community’ presupposes a shared ‘identity’, but ‘identity’ is ceaselessly processual, when does the bounded entity ‘community’ come into being?

429 Hickman, *The Irish Community*, p. 15.
From an analytic perspective it is perhaps more useful to see the ‘Irish community’ as a ‘particular public’, constructed through the competing practices of a range of actors including the church, welfare agencies, ethnic entrepreneurs, academics, activists, novelists and memoirists, and, at particular moments, through the representational practices of British journalists and politicians. This public is the site of a diverse and historically shifting set of discourses within which competing versions of experience are imagined in relation to multiple other publics. Migrants invest in the forms of this imaginary in diverse ways, in some instances changing the imaginary, or they may not interact with it at all, opting instead to constitute themselves through the terms of other cultural forms. The essential point is that it represents one repository from which migrants’ may draw images of self; it represents one audience in relation to which subjects make sense of their experiences. It does not, therefore, meet the requirements of a bounded notion of ‘community’, but it nonetheless conditions migrants’ horizons of possibility for subjectivity constitution.

Migrant subjectivity constitution was thus more complex than what is implied by the notion of ‘community’. This had to do with the highly differentiated character of migrants’ discursive environments. But it also had to with how psychic interiorities conditioned understanding and investment in those environments.

**Dis/integrating the Irish migrant self**

In the course of explaining how the concept of ‘identity’ is to be deployed in *Religion, Class and Identity* Mary Hickman writes that:

Identity is not being used as a psychological concept but to denote social and political consciousness. The focus of the study is on national identity…The construction of this national framework of identity in Britain and its relationship to subjective consciousness form the backdrop for understanding the experience and identity of the Irish in Britain. Identity is posed here as an arena of contestation. The struggle is between the dominant national culture, as it is constructed to be, and the various sources of oppositional consciousness which confront it.\(^{430}\)

Following on from the points made above, one kind of problem with this conceptualisation of ‘identity’ is that it obviates the role of discursive mediation in shaping how migrants understood their experiences and constituted their identities. The Irish are assumed to possess an ‘oppositional consciousness’ because this is inscribed within their social position in Britain at a particular moment in the development of the British nation. A linked problem, however, concerns the effort to bracket-off the psychic dimension of social experience. As well as obviating the role of discourse, positing experience and identity as inscribed within social context naturalises the duality of subject/object, obliterating the influence of psychic processes upon subjects’ interactions with its environment.

By contrast, the exploration of migrant subjectivities undertaken in this thesis has suggested that such processes were central to how subjects negotiated their experiences of migration to post-1945 England. The diverse forms of interplay between social position and discursive social imaginary evidenced in migrants’ narratives were not only an effect of the differentiated character of those discursive environments; how subjects’ invested in the forms available was always mediated by interior psychic processes concerning the relation between the self and sets of internal phantasy objects. The habitation of one discourse and not another, how that discourse was interpreted and in turn deployed in terms of the fashioning and projection of a version of self, was intimately shaped by internal desires, impulses and beliefs accreted and sedimented through earlier experience, through previous interactions between the psychic and the social. This shaping was itself underpinned by a desire for subjective composure, to form a unified and integrated whole from the different and potentially conflicting parts of the self.

As we have seen, integrating the self in this way involved on-going dialogues between past and present, local and national, public and private. Migrant memory production was conditioned by attempts to make the experiences being reconstructed support the needs of the narrating self situated in the present, where this referred to intersecting needs for biographical coherence between sedimented versions of self and social recognition and belonging within a variable set of publics. Crucially here, running through all these negotiations were ongoing readings of ‘here’ in relation to ‘there’. Overlapping and intersecting with the multiple conversations subjects were engaged in within their narratives was a dynamic whereby they sought to make the place of settlement cohere with the place
left behind. Settlement was a process through which ties to the place left behind could be re-affirmed, re-worked or denied, but ‘here’ and ‘there’ were always engaged in interplay because both terms related to sets of imagos which the subject worked to bring into relation in order to compose itself.

At the theoretical level, this enables us to add on the one hand to the concept of composure, and on the other, to notions of doubleness and hybridity. Regarding the former, if the process of composure always involves ongoing negotiations between past and present, public and private, local and national, for the migrant self it involves too an overlapping negotiation between there and here. Regarding the latter, if the production of migrant memory always involves a dialogue between here and there, reading here in relation to there is also conditioned by the processes of composure, which is to say that a) the dialogue is always mediated and framed by available discourses which set limits on and affirm particular sorts of belonging b) the dialogue is underpinned by an attempt to psychically integrate the self, a process which can take a variety of forms c) the dialogue conditions and is conditioned by multiple other conversations, which is to say that the formation of ‘national’, ‘ethnic’ or ‘diasporic’ belongings are inextricably tied to the negotiations the self finds itself in within other arenas of identity construction.

A number of general points follow from these considerations. Firstly, any attempt to analyse ‘social and political consciousness’ needs to approach ‘identity’ as a ‘psychological concept’ because social interaction always involves a psychic dimension. How migrants negotiate the migration process, forming and reworking identifications through interaction with the spaces they inhabit, is conditioned by, and generates complex emotions and desires through, on-going processes of psychic integration. Constructing an ‘ethnic identity’ or ‘assimilating’ is inextricably bound-up with these processes. Secondly, personal narratives of migration, whether they tell of belonging or exclusion, success or failure, cannot be read as unmediated representations of the past or of the experiences of the self in the past. The reconstruction of past experience is an inherently interpretative process that involves conscious and unconscious re-writings in accordance with the shifting subjective needs of the present self situated in a changing world. This problematises the analytic project of ‘recovery’ history, but enables more nuanced insights into the dynamics shaping Irish migrant’s experiences in post-war England. Exploration of the conversations on-going
within migrant’s narratives makes apparent multiple sites of belonging and the reworking of subjectivities overtime: re-writings of the past correspond to re-fashionings of the self. ‘Recovery’ history, hitched to broad categories of identity, fails to capture such shifts because ‘identity’ tends to be posited as a thing, militating against an understanding of subjectivity as processual and subject to change.

These re-writings and re-fashionings were closely related to processes of splitting within migrants’ narratives. As stated, the production of memories was underpinned by an effort to achieve subjective composure, to integrate the different parts of the self into a coherent whole. Integrating these parts, however, was by no means straight-forward or automatic within the narratives analysed. Apparent in all the narratives were points of subjective splitting where, in order to constitute the self as a coherent narrative subject, problematic parts of the self and its past had to be denied or repressed, sublimated or projectively disavowed. Occurring in patterned ways, and linked to broader strategies of composure, these ego defences worked to secure and protect certain parts of the self from other parts that threatened to undermine it. In terms of the narrative constitution of self, the anxieties and desires that underpinned such defences disposed subjects to interact with particular discourses in distinctive ways, producing in turn important tensions, elisions and exaggerations within their narratives of experience.

In most instances, these tensions and silences were consistent with the aims of subjective composure: while they pointed to unresolved conflicts and the continuing structuring effects of particular forms of anxiety, the patterns of splitting associated with them were integral to the achievement to some form of composure within the interview, albeit a form with discernable points of instability. In certain instances, however, feelings of ‘discomposure’ threatened to sabotage further efforts towards integration. In these cases, ego defences were unable to contain the anxieties threatening the stability of the self, resulting in rapidly spiralling patterns of splitting that fragmented the self into numerous incoherent pieces, or in deep feelings of loss. At these moments, signalled through tears and expressions of anger rather than narrative elisions and tensions, the process of narration itself threatened to break down.
These points of splitting are important for a number of reasons. Most obviously, they highlight how the negotiations involved in subjectivity formation render it a problematic rather than a straightforward process, involving emotional pain as well as pleasure. In the eight narratives examined in this thesis the problematic character of subjectivity formation was on frequent display, suggesting that the process of migration poses particular problems for subjective coherence, albeit for individually specific reasons. Memories of leaving and subjects’ conversations with the place left behind more generally manifested a range of subjective tensions, suggesting that the relation between ‘there’ and here’ was a particularly fraught one for certain migrants. Points of splitting mark moments where belongings and the ends of social action have been reworked under particular pressures and in certain situations. More than the repression, negation or denial of some aspect of the self’s past, splitting provokes new impulses and anxieties which generate complex pressures within the architectonics of the self, and which point desire in new directions, frequently multiple different directions simultaneously.

As such, points of splitting make visible the decentred nature of subjectivity. The disunity of subjectivity noted above is not a simple reflection of competition and variegation within subjects’ discursive environments, but has also to do with the inherently fractured nature of selfhood, with the fact that the self is composed of different and by no means cohesive parts. This has profound implications for how we think about ‘Irish identity’. The in-built determinism of totalising narratives about ‘assimilation’ and ‘invisibility’ is not only an effect of ascribing social structures too much agency; it also presupposes purity of motivation, that action is governed by one goal or need, and that different parts of the self, like a colony of worker ants, instinctively coalesce in support of that goal, ensuring a linear, unidirectional trajectory over the course of a life, indeed, over the course of groups of lives. The decentred nature of migrants’ narratives shows this assumption to be untenable; processes of social action and identification cannot be described in terms of general narratives based on a single teleology. Explaining migrant subjectivity involves constructing multiple stories about the shifting relations between different parts of the self.
‘Muting’, the ‘cultural circuit’ and the communal memory of the Irish in Britain

The ‘invisibility’ and ‘assimilation’ paradigms both implicitly posit the existence of a unified Irish migrant experience in Britain, albeit in opposing ways. The points developed thus far have attempted to complicate such an assumption. In addition, however, the narrative of ‘invisibility’ also includes a story about the negation of Irish identity. A central claim of the ‘invisibility’ paradigm is that there has been a public silence in Britain concerning the experiences of the Irish and that Irish migrants, in particular those who arrived during the post war years, have adopted a ‘low public profile’ about their identity due to overwhelming pressures to incorporate themselves within the terms of white Britishness. Indeed, it has been suggested by academics and activists that Irish people in Britain habitually conceal markers of their true identity in response to an ingrained hostility to Irish people within British culture.

Irish stereotypes are certainly deeply embedded within the British cultural imaginary. As various authors have argued, Victorian culture was a site for the popular production of derogatory Irish stereotypes in Britain, reflecting a range of contemporary anxieties around issues of class, religion, race and Anglo-Irish relations. Echoes of these constructions were readily apparent in the period after 1945. In the decades immediately following the Second World War the issue of Irish independence could still generate political tensions, while public concerns about the ‘rough’ leisure practices of young Irishmen bore the structuring effects of pre-existing images of the ‘drunken Irishman’. Most importantly, the effects of ‘The Troubles’ in Britain incited a resurgence of popular anti-Irish feelings, particularly in response to the PIRA’s bombing campaign in England. During the 1970s and 80s, and to a lesser extent the 1990s, the practices of journalists, judges, the police and politicians helped construct ‘the Irish community’ as the object of a suspicious gaze. As well as generating popular anxieties around Irish people, this contributed to discriminatory treatment of Irish people within the British justice system.

It does not automatically follow, however, that 1) the production of Irish stereotypes in the Victorian period and after 1945 constitute a continuum 2) the existence of Irish stereotypes within British culture necessarily correlate with a negation of ‘Irish identity’ in Britain 3)
anti-Irish feeling in Britain compelled the formation of a unified (yet negated?) ‘oppositional consciousness’ amongst Irish migrants.

The production of Irish stereotypes in Victorian Britain took place within the context of overlapping debates about the ‘condition of England’, Catholic emancipation, the purity of the British ‘race’, and ‘The Irish Question’. Migration to Britain in the decades after 1945, however, occurred under very different social and historical conditions. While Irish stereotypes continued to be a part of post-war British culture, these did not proliferate to the same extent as in earlier periods of settlement, nor were they activated through the contemporary debates and tensions associated with immigration from Africa, Asia and the West Indies. In addition, post-war migrants left an independent Ireland where competing discourses on emigration constructed the identity of the emigrant in diverse ways, and were arriving in Britain at a time when the country was undergoing transition from an industrial to a consumer and service driven economy, a transformation which had complex implications for the constitution of social identities within British culture.

Against this backdrop, Irish migrants participated in pre-existing Catholic welfare networks, established loose networks of Irish associations, and wove a semi-formal, consumer-based culture of sociability around pubs, dancehalls and music-making in major areas of settlement. But these, the most popular public or communal spaces within which post-war migrants reproduced versions of Irish selfhood, were not sites for the expression of militant demands for racial equality, ethnic recognition or separate political representation. On the contrary, while the Irish centres or the county associations could be sites for the performance of nationalistic Irishness, the rhetoric of spokesmen associated with these spaces was also socially conservative, reflecting concerns with respectability and mobility, while the informal cultures of sociability centred on the pub and dancehall were predicated on, and reflected the aspirations of, migrants in possession of enhanced powers of consumption. It is worth remembering too that many migrants simply did not frequent these spaces, or frequented them only during a particular, usually an early, phase of the migration process. Such migrants pursued trajectories of settlement largely unmediated by the narratives of conservative Catholic Irishness framing the community-building activities of ‘official’ bodies and immigrant entrepreneurs.
These aspects of the context of post-war migration did not determine migrants’ experiences, but they contributed to the specificity of the interaction between social position and discursive environment through which distinctive modes of migrant self-understanding were generated. In this respect, while it makes sense to talk about the subjective effects of the internalisation of negative stereotypes, problems attach to attempts to distinguish between the public expression of a sanitised, de-politicised, ‘incorporated’ identity and the concealment of a ‘true’ Irish identity behind a public mask. Distinguishing between ‘real’ and ‘false’ embodiments of ‘identity’ unjustifiably assumes an inevitability and desirability about ‘identity’:

The fact that, in a given historical juncture, a certain referent operates as an object of identity does not mean the same thing will occur in all historical situations, and when it fails to occur, that does not mean the process of creating identity has not yet been consumed, is still in an early stage, or that it has been blocked by false consciousness, nor, simply, that the individuals involved are prey to alienation, in the sense that they have failed in their attempt to know themselves…If identity is causally linked to the object, and not the referent, the fact that similar social positions generate different forms of identity (or do not generate any) should not be interpreted as an anomaly, but simply as a consequence of the fact that such social positions have been articulated through different discursive patterns. This is what explains, for example, societies with similar class divisions presenting such distinct class identities, or not having any at all.431

The discursive practices of a range of contemporary actors, including Irish politicians and journalists, British observers and the Catholic Church, ‘official’ community bodies and migrant diarists and popular novelists, produced a diverse range of competing narratives on the experiences of the Irish in post-war Britain. This discursive imaginary may not have articulated the social position of Irish migrants in such a way that ‘ethnic visibility’ became a collective object, but it supplied a range of subject-positions from which to negotiate and understand the experience of migration. Irish migrant subjectivities in post-war Britain were not negated, but constituted through the specific ways in which a variable set of contemporary discourses objectified the distinct socio-historical contexts of post-war migration.

431 Cabrera, Post-Social History, p. 75.
It is important to underline that these processes of objectification took place in relation to, rather than independent of, forms of stereotyping and discrimination. In the post-war period, for example, negative images of the Irish navvy were appropriated by Irish priests as a cautionary device to warn young emigrants of the dangers of British culture, prompting in turn counter-representations of migrant masculinity which emphasised Irish respectability and domesticity, themes which resonated closely with narratives of white Britishness in this period. More strikingly, the production of the Irish as a ‘suspect community’ during the period of ‘The Troubles’ incited a number of competing representations of the place of the Irish within British society. For some older, more established migrants, ‘The Troubles’ threatened to disrupt their settlement within British society, inducing public disavowals of the IRA’s tactics and attempts to re-affirm the respectability of the Irish in Britain. In sharp contrast, for some second generation migrants ‘The Troubles’ became a means of articulating a more militant sense of Irishness, a process which fed into a campaign for ‘ethnic mobilisation’ in the 1980s and 90s.

This relationality in the shaping of representations of migrant experience complicates attempts to posit ‘identity’ as discrete and self-contained. As Ann Laura Stoler states in relation to students of colonial history:

Students of colonial history seem to want to have it both ways, a story of a hegemonic colonial state, saturating both the colonial frame and the cracks in which the colonised live, and a story in which deft evasion leaves the memories of these same actors unscathed by state intrusion.\(^\text{432}\)

Arguments for the ‘invisibility’ of the ‘Irish community’ in Britain claim that powerful British institutions have incorporated and negated Irish identity, yet that an Irish identity has been preserved apart from the subsuming tendencies of a hostile British culture. But the accounts of Irish migrants in post-war Britain did not ‘already possess hidden circuits of movement’.\(^\text{433}\) The circulation of Irish stereotypes within British culture did not take place in a space sealed-off from this discursive imaginary, but played into its formation in complex ways. ‘The Troubles’ in particular catalysed the formation of a cultural circuit that


\(^{433}\) Stoler, ‘Memory Work in Java’, p. 287.
incorporated and enmeshed the discursive and consumption practices of a range of actors. The onset of ‘The Troubles’, in particular the bombing of British cities, generated hostility towards Irish people resident in Britain. As well as the defensive narratives of ‘official’ community spokesmen, this hostility incited a form of ethnic mobilisation amongst more radical second generation migrants. Mobilisation involved public protests, the circulation of radical literature and the writing of letters to influential figures within the British political system and media, but it involved too the collection of oral data for research projects aimed at substantiating claims about anti-Irish racism and the authenticity of Irish identity. During the 1980s and 90s a circuit took shape by which personal accounts of discrimination and cultural belonging, coaxed and collected at the local level by activist-researchers, became embedded in publications and national research reports projecting a generalised story about the position of ‘the Irish community’ to a broad public audience. At this point, such stories became widely available for popular consumption, and as we have seen, could be routed back into private memory production in the present. The oral history research carried out for this project in turn generates another contribution to the motions this circuit.

These dynamics imply a number of things regarding the production of Irish migrant memory in post-1945 Britain. In contrast to claims about the ‘assimilation’, ‘incorporation’ or ‘repression’ of ‘Irish identity’, the study of migrant memory undertaken in this thesis suggests that post-1945 British culture was scene to a proliferation of discourse on Irish experience, contributing to the creation of a repository of different tropes, images and narrative formulas whose meaning and form was inextricably related to the broader British culture in which they were produced. Instead of a period of ‘muting’, this period witnessed active attempts to materialise a communal consciousness and the amplification of a number of versions of Irish experience at the national level, processes which involved both the recovery of earlier experiences and the creation of new personal and collective narratives. Indeed, although British anxieties about the Irish were most ubiquitous during the nineteenth century, more autobiographical material has been generated for the period after 1945 than at any other time in the long history of the Irish in Britain, a point which, again, points to the specificity of this phase of Irish migration to Britain.

This intensification of discourse has important implications for the politics of Irish migrant memory in Britain. The representational and mnemonic practices associated with this
moment were heavily shaped by the identity project of a network of activists and academics focused on achieving public recognition for an ‘Irish ethnicity’. The proliferation of personal and collective narratives incited by ethnic mobilisation thus does not signify the simple recovery of a lost past or the un-muting of a suppressed identity, but the active construction and publicisation of versions of migrant identity that in important ways reflect the aspirations and frustrations of the activists involved in eliciting and deploying such memories. The crucial point here is that, by making these versions widely available, particularly within migrant communal spaces, the representational practices associated with ‘ethnic mobilisation’ potentially alter the discursive conditions under which memory production takes place in the present, with diverse implications for how migrant experiences of the past are recalled and understood. This study has suggested that the narratives of experience publicised through the opening of an Irish ‘ethnic’ cultural circuit may become implicated in the reconstruction of personal experiences of migration, facilitating re-writings of the past over time. In so doing, such narratives may encourage, affirm and amplify certain aspects of experience; they may provide a means of making sense of and organising experience, creating a position from which to speak and secure social recognition. They may also deny, limit or exclude aspects of experience, and so narrow or complicate the possibilities for self-understanding and expression.

Two final points follow from this. Firstly, the ‘invisibility’ framework is not only a description of Irish migrant experience, but can be seen as actively engaged in the re-working of Irish subjectivities in Britain at the end of the twentieth century. Secondly, the view of migrant memory production elaborated here suggests a need to reformulate the notion of ‘silence’ signified by the trope of ‘invisibility’. As Michel Foucault has stated:

Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies…There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.434

A central claim of the ‘invisibility’ paradigm is that there has been a public silence in Britain concerning the experiences of Irish migrants, the chief effect of which has been the muting of Irish identity. By contrast, while there was no uniform Irish migrant experience in post-war Britain, this thesis has suggested that the period after 1945 witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of discourses on Irish experience. This, however, should not be taken to imply that there were no silences. The issue of silence does not relate exclusively to the incorporating strategies of state discourse, but is an integral part of all the discourses migrants’ interacted with, including those of the migrant communal imaginary and the militant rhetoric of ethnic mobilisation. However, whether or not an elision at the level of discourse translated into a silence within a subject’s narrative of migration could not be determined by the form of the discourse alone. In most instances, silences within subjects’ narratives were the product simultaneously of the limiting effects of the cultural circuit and interior processes of subjective splitting. At a theoretical level, this might be taken to suggest that the phenomenon identified as muting is not simply an effect of discourse but also involves an interior process of splitting-off imagos, which itself will also involve a transformation of emotion and re/identification, rather than simply the loss, repression or silencing of a voice. Such a suggestion de-stabilises the very meaning of ‘muting’ as applied in many contexts. For although there are certainly instances where the limiting effects of discourse are coercive, in many instances the elisions of discourse are actively used by subjects as part of their own strategies of self-composure. Are such instances examples of muting or of self-construction?

The future of ‘the Irish in Britain’

This thesis has argued that the unreflexive deployment of a categorical subject-status, the Irish in Britain, has tended to mask how migrant subjectivities were constituted through diverse interactions between social position and discursive imaginary. From this standpoint, a key focus for future research is the de-constitution of the category ‘the Irish’ through investigation into the specific dynamics underpinning the production of migrant subjectivities in particular contexts, undertaken through the reconstruction of migrants’ experiences within these settings. Once this is taken as a focus, research possibilities begin to proliferate. Within the confines of this thesis it has been possible to explore four specific spaces or sites of memory. Many others, however, would have provided objects of study just as important to understanding Irish migrants’ experiences in post-1945 Britain.
Nevertheless, a few areas stand out. For the decades after the war, we need to know more about the factors shaping the construction of the Irish particular public and their relation to discourses on British domesticity and race. An important source here is the records and ephemera of the London Irish counties associations, which have recently been collected and archived at London Metropolitan University. We also need to know much more about the construction of migrant femininities and the family more generally in Britain. As well as the religious literature relating to groups such as The Legion of Mary, an important source here is *The Irish Post*. Running from 1970 to the present, the paper provides a means of exploring how images of migrant femininity were constructed and re-worked overtime in relation images of British femininity within the particular public that developed in the second half of the twentieth century. An interesting dynamic for future study thus concerns the relationship between such constructions and the versions of gendered selfhood projected by migrants within oral narratives.

Perhaps the area for which there exists most opportunities for study is that of ‘The Troubles’. A rich vein for the study of migrant memory concerns the intersections between national, communal and personal memories of iconic moments of ‘The Troubles’ such as the Birmingham bombing, the Hunger Strikes, and the incarceration and release of the Guildford Four. Such studies would provide much needed insight into how differently situated Irish migrants’ experienced ‘The Troubles’, enabling investigation into the different ways in which Irish identifications were consolidated or re-shaped in this period. In addition, however, such studies could also shed light on how narratives of British identity were re-shaped in relation to ‘The Troubles’. Although there have been a few studies of how ‘The Troubles’ cast ‘suspicion’ on Irish people in Britain, no comprehensive study exists on what these discourses on Irishness mean for the re-workings of Britishness between 1968 and 1998. Given the fact that British cities were systematically attacked by Irish republican groups for most of this period, and given the difficult political and cultural problems posed by the conflict in Northern Ireland from a British perspective, it seems incredible that the British cultural memory of the Northern Irish Troubles has not become a major area of study within either Irish or British history.
Irish migrants’ experiences need to be situated within the context of this memory, and this thesis has made a small start in this respect. However, as noted in the introduction, time and other constraints have meant that this study has dealt only with migrants from the south of Ireland. Major research into the experiences of migrants from Northern Ireland, both Catholic and Protestant, is thus required. To date, studies of ‘The Irish in Britain’ have lumped Northern Irish Catholics into the larger population of southern Irish migrants. However, while there are important justifications for doing this, it seems likely that there also would have been many differences in experience. Northern Irish culture in the post-war period was not riven with competing public discourses on the emigrant, though it was riven with other kinds of tension, for example. Similarly, it seems intuitively plausible that Northern Irish Catholics might have had distinctive understandings of ‘The Troubles’. The same goes a fortiori for Northern Irish Protestants, about whom we know almost nothing. How Northern Irish Protestant migrants in post-1945 Britain negotiated the conflicts thrown up by the outbreak of ‘The Troubles’ represents a particularly interesting opportunity for exploring the issue of difference within constructions of Irishness in Britain.
Appendix 1

Irish Migration Figures

Table (i) Average annual net rate of emigration from Southern Ireland, 1901-1966

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emigration, 1901 – 1966</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901 – 11 avr.</td>
<td>26,000 per annum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911 – 26 avr.</td>
<td>19,000 per annum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926 – 36 avr.</td>
<td>16,000 per annum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936 – 46 avr.</td>
<td>18,000 per annum*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946 – 51 avr.</td>
<td>24,000 per annum**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951 – 56 avr.</td>
<td>39,000 per annum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956 – 61 avr.</td>
<td>42,000 per annum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961 – 66 avr.</td>
<td>16,000 per annum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Small net inflow in 1932 due to economic conditions caused by the Great Depression in the USA and UK

** By 1945, estimated 50,000 were Irish volunteers in the British army, with the bulk being employed in war-related industries in the UK.


Table (ii) Average annual net emigration from Southern Ireland classified by gender, 1871 – 1971

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERIOD</th>
<th>MALES</th>
<th>FEMALES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1871 – 81</td>
<td>24,958</td>
<td>25,214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881 – 91</td>
<td>29,257</td>
<td>30,476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891 – 1901</td>
<td>20,315</td>
<td>19,327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901 – 11</td>
<td>11,764</td>
<td>14,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911 – 26</td>
<td>13,934</td>
<td>13,068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926 – 36</td>
<td>7,255</td>
<td>9,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936 – 46</td>
<td>11,258</td>
<td>7,453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946 – 51</td>
<td>10,309</td>
<td>14,075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951 – 56</td>
<td>21,657</td>
<td>17,696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956 – 61</td>
<td>21,915</td>
<td>20,486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961 – 66</td>
<td>7,523</td>
<td>8,598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966 - 71</td>
<td>4,950</td>
<td>5,831</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 2

Brief biographical details of interviewees

Notes:
(i) Pseudonyms are used in all cases
(ii) ‘Work’ refers to paid employment

**Clare Cullen**

Born: 1940, grew up in rural North Cork
Parents: Mother, housewife; Father, sergeant in Civic Guards
Education: National school until 14, secretarial college
Migration: London 1957, Kent 1960, Cork 196?, Oldham 197?
Post-migration work: Bank
Marriage: 1959, 3 children
Interview: 04/03/09

**Kate Daly**

Born: 1941, grew up Co. Sligo
Parents: Mother, housewife; Father, farmer and quarry owner
Education: National school until 14, convent in Roscommon
Migration: Dublin 1959, Manchester 1961
Pre-migration work: Children’s nurse
Post-migration work: General nurse, factory line operative, care worker
Marriage: 1964, 4 children
Interview: 25/03/09

**Joe Doherty**

Born: 1944, grew up Co. Longford
Parents: Mother, housewife; Father, farmer and thatcher
Education: National school until 14, then local vocational school until 16.
Bill Duffy
Born: 1951, grew up Co. Roscommon
Parents: Mother, housewife; Father, farmer
Education: National school until 13
Migration: 1967, Manchester
Post-migration work: Construction industry (labourer, site manager, executive)
Marriage: 1972, 3 children
Interview: 13/03/09

Brenda Grady
Born: 1927, grew up Co. Galway
Parents: Mother, housewife; Father, farmer
Education: National school until 14
Migration: 1946 to Lymme, 1947 Manchester
Pre-migration work: Domestic servant
Post-migration work: Domestic servant, receptionist, housewife, dinner-lady
Marriage: 1949, 6 children
Interview: 14/04/08

Sean Hagan
Born: 1935, grew up Co. Offaly
Parents: Mother, housewife; Father, rural labourer
Education: National school until 12
Migration: Bolton 1956
Pre-migration work: Turf cutting, beet picking, road worker, Irish army
Post-migration work: Cotton mill (warehouse), construction (labourer), night watchman
Marriage: 1957, 6 children
Interview: 18/02/09

Denis Heaney
Born: 1927
Parents: Mother, housewife; Father, farmer
Education: National school until 14
Pre-migration work: Turf cutting
Post-migration work: Foundry, construction (labourer, subcontractor)
Marriage: 1952, 2 children
Interview: 20/03/10

Rosie Long
Born: 1938, grew up in Cork City
Parents: Mother, orderly at mental asylum, orderly at school for the blind; Father, left family
Education: Girls convent until 14
Pre-migration work: Hospital orderly, orderly at school for the blind
Post-migration work: Domestic servant, food server, care worker
Marriage: 1960, 2 children, plus 4 children from a second relationship
Interview: 11/02/09
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