

Features

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Our endlessly complicated relationship with England

Ireland And The Irish In Interwar England Mo Moulton

Cambridge University Press, €93

God be with the days, back in the 1980s - long before anonymous trolls could post inane comments online - when, as a writer, I regularly received written hate mail in the post. If I touched upon Catholic hypocrisy or anomalies, the mail was unsigned, abusive and posted within Ireland. But if I said anything mildly mocking of nationalistic pieties, my hate mail was invariably threatening, signed in elongated Irish language names and posted from cities in England.

However, despite these Gaelic names I could never tell what nationalities my angry correspondents possessed. After all, the true embodiment of Ireland's Gaelic theatrical tradition, Micheál Mac Liammóir, was a Londoner named Alfred Willmore, who lacked any Irish roots. Likewise, nobody embodied the unthinkingly vicious 1970s IRA murder campaign better than Londoner John Stephenson. After a stint with the RAF in Jamaica, he reinvented himself as Seán Mac Stíofáin, although he never lost his Cockney accent.

This process of imaginative reinvention worked both ways. Few people seemed as English and part of the British establishment as Viscount Brendan Bracken - Churchill's wartime minister for information - who carefully airbrushed from his public persona the fact he was a Catholic from Templemore, whose father had been active in the IRB. When Beckett was asked if he was a British writer he famously said: 'Au contraire.' His answer was pithy and correct: that which is contrary is opposite and opposites attract, while still remaining opposites.

Numerous books have dissected the fraught relationship between Ireland and England in the years leading up to the War of Independence. A flotilla of books, like Clair Wills's *The Neutral Ireland*, have examined the equally fraught and interlinked relationship during World War II, while there is no shortage of studies of the huge influx of Irish emigrants into England during the stagnant fag-end of de Valera's reign.

Some 80% of Irish children born between 1931 and 1941 had to emigrate.

From any class of 40 pupils in 1950 only eight could expect to live as adults in Ireland. The others left because there was nothing for them here. They left to the relief of government ministers who saw emigration as a safety valve on social unrest, sluicing away the disaffected and allowing the government to not tackle fundamental problems. They left to the gain of successive ministers for finance because all the 10 shilling notes sent home from Birmingham and Manchester subsided the Irish economy to the equivalent of roughly a billion Euro every year in today's money.

These 1950s figures with cardboard suitcases have become the atypical image of the Irish emigrant to England. But part of the joy of Mo Moulton's multidisciplinary reappraisal of the relationship during the largely unexplored interwar period is that she throws up wonderful juxtapositions, contradictions and anomalies. The poor still arrive

in Liverpool with little money or prospects, but she also explores the forgotten influx of Southern loyalists whose sense of being British entailed a sense of entitlement for compensation.

These were not just former landlords, but what were termed as 'other and poorer classes - the shopkeepers, the old government officials, the constabulary, the loyal soldiers of the Irish regiments'. The financial requirements of this very different category of emigrant (whom the Duke of Northumberland described as 'refugees...of all classes, from the well-bred lady to the rough farm hand') were defined as a debt to innocent war victims, in contrast to Catholic emigrants who were viewed with hostility as scroungers taking advantage of England's generous public relief system.

The Duke's apprehension about Catholic immigrants was matched by that of the Irish Catholic hierarchy, when it came to women. In 1923, the National Vigilance Association echoed the concerns of Irish bishops about this 'leakage...of unprotected and inexperienced Irish girls' who might be led astray in England by what Moulton wryly terms 'a combination of social pressure, unsavoury characters and lack of protection' - this lack of protection being a refusal by young women to have their lives controlled by the Church.

Irish newspapers advised female emigrants how to recognise NVA volunteers at English train stations who would steer them away from the moral dangers of a pagan world, where they might be 'dazzled by city lights, consumerism, fast living and all sorts of bodily desires'. Obviously they felt Irish women were never troubled by bodily desires in Leitrim or Roscommon, where the female orgasm presumably only crept in with the advent of colour television.

But emigration is only one facet of Moulton's fascinating study, which is as much an assimilation and redefining of not so much physical but social borders during those years when Britain stopped seeing Irishness only in terms of 'the Irish Problem' but as an integral strata within the make-up of British society. Meanwhile, successive Irish governments were unpicking the loose locks that bound us to a Commonwealth that was soon to implode, using every diplomatic ploy to assert Ireland's political separateness. But the interdependent relationship meant, when the Republic was finally declared, far more of its citizens had to make new lives in Britain than could find work in Ireland.

From sabotage campaigns to social clubs, and the misguided, over-romanticised notions of Ireland expounded in the English literary imagination, Moulton's book is a captivating, informative twinning and unravelling of those aspects of social history which our two very separate (yet perpetually intermingling) nations shared between the wars.

'Irish women needed protection from such moral dangers as 'city lights, fast living and all sorts of bodily desires'

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