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978-1-107-04840-9 - The Best are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture

Clair Wills

Excerpt

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Introduction

The Crying Game

It isn't a case of staying or going. Forced to stay or forced to go. Never the freedom to decide and make the choice for ourselves. And we're half-men here, or half-men away, and how can we hope ever to do anything.

Tom Murphy¹

One of the last models of 'city and country' is the system we now know as imperialism.

Raymond Williams²

When I boarded the train at Listowel that morning it seemed as if everyone was leaving. It was the same at every station along the way. Dun Laoghaire, for the first time, was a heartbreaking experience – the goodbyes to husbands going back after Christmas, chubby-faced boys and girls leaving home for the first time, bewilderment written all over them, hard-faced old-stagers who never let on but who felt it worst of all because they knew only too well what lay before them.

John B. Keane³

John B. Keane left Ireland on the 6th of January 1952, when it appeared that 'everyone was leaving'. The protracted post-war Irish economic crisis had created a situation in which the country was unable to provide for vast numbers of the rural poor. During the 1950s more than 400,000 people left independent Ireland, nearly a sixth of the total population recorded in 1951, and a vastly higher proportion of the working population. The majority left for work in Britain, which would be home to one million Irish-born – then the largest migrant population in Britain – by the late 1960s. Among that million were people of all classes, including middle-class professionals – doctors, lawyers, and aspiring college-educated young

¹ Tom Murphy, *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer's Assistant*, in *A Whistle in the Dark and Other Plays* (London: Methuen, 1989), p. 172.

² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 2011), p. 279.

³ John B. Keane, *Self-Portrait* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1964), p. 32.

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people for whom advancement had long meant a spell abroad in England - as well as the large army of priests, brothers and nuns whose careers had always involved moving across national borders. But undoubtedly the largest section of the emigrating population stemmed from the poorer rural areas. During the war and in the immediate post-war years young men and women from the labouring and small-farmer classes migrated in large groups to take up work on contract labour schemes building large-scale works, in hospitals, in mines, in factories. Emigration highlighted the division between a traditional Irish small-farming culture in decline and a secular, industrial, modernising, urban British culture which many saw as in part responsible for Irish economic stagnation.

As Keane suggests, the young men and women forced to take the boat were as susceptible as any others to the belief that they were losing all that was valuable by leaving. He goes on to describe the voyage:

All around us as we left Dun Laoghaire, there was drunkenness. The younger men were drunk – not violently so but tragically so, as I was, to forget the dreadful loneliness of having to leave home. Underneath it all was the heart-breaking, frightful anguish of separation... The whole scene reminded me of the early Christian martyrs going out to face the terrors of the arena. Laugh if you like, but there was an unbelievable spirit of fraternity, a kind of brotherhood, a communal feeling of tragedy which embraced us all.⁴

The metaphor of being fed to the lions seems wildly exaggerated, yet the overwhelming majority of accounts of leaving Ireland in this period focus on the tears – on the consciousness of irreparable loss and separation. It was, as for Stephen Rea's Fergus, the IRA volunteer turned London labourer in Neil Jordan's film, a crying game. Stories of post-war migration from the West Indies stress hopes and expectations – hopes of a prosperous new life that for the most part were to be cruelly crushed. By contrast Irish emigration, if we are to believe the written accounts, took place in an atmosphere of dread, fear or resignation.

It would be foolish, and insensitive, to deny that real feelings of anxiety and alarm were at play, and that for many of these young emigrants leaving home was, at least initially, experienced as 'tragedy', as Keane suggests. Yet there were also migrants who made the journey in various

⁴ Ibid., p. 33. See also John Healy, *Death of an Irish Town* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1968), p. 45, where he describes 'the emigrant train': 'The train would pull into Charlestown to a crowded platform. It had travelled about 30 miles from Sligo through Collooney, Coolaney, Tubbercurry and Curry and the young girls who had left these towns and villages were still crying as the train came to a stop... The Guard's door slamming shut was the breaking point: like the first clatter of stones and sand on a coffin, it signalled the finality of the old life. They clutched and clung and wept in a frenzy.'

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degrees of excitement and anticipation of adventure. There were parents who accepted without question that emigration meant profit, and that their children would grow up to make their lives elsewhere. The fact that these experiences are marginalised across the range of records of post-war migration deserves explanation. There appears to be a discrepancy between the particular and varied experience of emigration and the way that it appears in the contemporary record. That disjunction lies at the heart of this study.

When I began the research for this book, I hoped and assumed that it would be possible to offer a fuller picture of the social and cultural history of post-war Irish migrants, by drawing on a range of different representations. I was interested in the ways in which emigrants were portrayed in official documents produced in both Ireland and Britain; in contemporary sociology; in Catholic advice pamphlets; in articles and letters to the newspapers; in popular literature such as serials in women's magazines and *Ireland's Own*; in film, drama, and literary fiction. While this range of representations has certainly illuminated the social history of emigration, and I hope in interesting ways, it has also proved remarkably resistant to historical pressure. However broadly I cast the net, fishing for opinions, images, records and depictions of Irish migrants, I brought up material which seemed to speak more clearly of the persistence of cultural stereotypes, and an ideology, or even fantasy, of Irish migration, than of the experience itself. The implied separation here between representation and reality is a problem, of course. After all, the family history which I outlined in my preface offers a version of experience couched in standard terms – the typical upwardly mobile Irish Catholic nurse, and the typical Irish labourer at the bottom of the pile – which is both 'true' and a product of narrative. Indeed these two cultural stereotypes account for a sizable proportion of the discourse on post-war Irish migrants in both Ireland and Britain. Rather than offering a cultural history of Irish migration, then, the aim of this book is to explore the strange, and mutually reinforcing, relationship between cultural stereotypes and social experience in the post-war years. I trace the evolution of a number of stock formations (including gendered stereotypes of the navy and nurse) across a range of literatures, at the same time interrogating them for what they may tell us about experience both 'inside' and 'outside' those formations.

One way of interpreting the weight given to loss and tragedy in narratives of emigration is as a form of cultural memory. The emphasis on misfortune derived partly from a kind of folk memory of emigration during the period of the famine and after, when leaving home mostly meant

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leaving for good, and when the symbolic death of the young emigrant was marked by the 'American Wake' – a sending-off party. Post-war travel had immeasurably shrunk the distances between home and abroad – and mainland Britain was of course much closer than the United States – yet arguably the ceaseless reiteration of departures and short-lived returns reinforced a sense of hopelessness. Separation would always be part of Irish growing up. As the playwright Tom Murphy recalls of his home town in County Galway, repetition increased the emotional rawness of the experience:

I think the most important feature of my growing up was the emigration from the family. Somebody always seemed to be arriving or going away. A lot of emotion centred around the little railway station in my home town of Tuam.⁵

According to Murphy, a significant portion of that emotion was expended on feelings of guilt. The emigrants of the '50s carried with them shame at having left Ireland and found a home with Ireland's traditional enemy, a sense of inferiority compared to those who stayed on native soil. 'They had a sense of being betrayed by the country of their origin here, but they also felt that they had betrayed that country.'⁶ The ability to make it in England, and the willingness to take advantage of work, freedom from authority and all that the welfare state had to offer – free health care, free education, socialised housing, a unionised workforce – was freighted with guilt as much as pride, for it meant having run out on Ireland. These emigrants tended to cling to their national and religious identity, confirming to themselves that they were a people who didn't belong in England. But when they went back home they found they didn't belong there either: they were a people in 'limbo', still 'looking over their shoulders backwards' in the late '60s.⁷

Many contemporary commentators pointed out that these problems of adjustment paradoxically had to do with the fact that emigration itself was relatively straightforward. There are numerous stories of people deciding to leave on the spur of the moment, jacking in poorly paid jobs one day and taking the bus the next, or travelling over with a friend who was returning to Britain after the holidays, as in this description of a young man from the Aran Islands:

⁵ Des Hickey and Gus Smith (eds.), *A Paler Shade of Green* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1972), p. 225.

⁶ Interview with Michael Billington in Nicholas Grene (ed.), *Talking about Tom Murphy* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2002), p. 96.

⁷ Hickey and Smith (eds.), *Paler Shade of Green*, p. 227.

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He brought a pal to the quay one evening on the cart. They went for a drink to pass the time while they were waiting for the steamer. In the end Cóilín went away with him. He left the horse and cart on the quayside. He left the house door open. He abandoned the dog even, barking after him on the quay.⁸

The journey over by train and boat could be done for less than five pounds, so that people left experimentally, planning to see whether prospects were any better across the water. They could always come back. But this meant that integration in British society was rarely a priority, and people could go for years shuttling back and forth between temporary lodgings in Britain and the family home in Ireland from which they became increasingly estranged.⁹ The apparent contradiction between the tears on leaving and the ease with which it was possible to travel back and forth may not really have been a contradiction at all, but a consequence of the continual repetition of departure, the constant reminders of home.

The tension between established narratives of emigrant experience, and the day-to-day reality, in all its variety, is threaded right through the many stages of the migrant encounter. Differences had partly to do with gender – women tended to integrate more easily into British society, not least because they came in contact with it more often, at the school gate, for example. They had to do with personal drive and ambition, and the range of opportunities open to Irish migrants in different parts of Britain. Prospects for those in the more settled, family-based communities which developed around the factories of Birmingham, Luton or Slough were worlds away from the experience of the casual labourer, shifting between temporary camps and lodgings, housing workers building the M1 or the Isle of Grain power station. The ghettoisation of the Irish labourer was, to some extent, chosen, at least in the early years of post-war migration, when the idea of returning home to Ireland having made a packet really did seem possible, and attempts at integration appeared a mere waste of time. But discrimination against the Irish also played an important part. Unreliable, shiftless, drunken, dirty, in the early years flea-ridden – attitudes towards the Irish poor were conditioned by long-held prejudices against Britain's violent and ungrateful neighbours. Those given to bigotry and intolerance had after all recently been proved right about the Irish

⁸ Richard Power, *Úll i mBarr an Ghéagáin/Apple on the Treetop*, trans. by Victor Power (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1980 [1958]), p. 145.

⁹ See A. E. C. W. Spencer, *Arrangements for the Integration of Irish Immigrants in England and Wales*, ed. Mary Daly (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2011), where Spencer argues that 'the ease of return acts as a constant deterrent to integration in Britain' (p. 31).

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bent towards low-down treachery, when Ireland had remained steadfastly neutral and refused to help Britain during the war.

The Irish were regularly described, in provincial papers, in company memos, in local council debates, even occasionally in Parliament, as lazy workers, unable to turn up on time or stick at a job, as benefit scroungers, as trade union trouble-makers, and as given to violence. On the other hand, they were just as likely to be praised for their willingness to work long hours and take on the hard physical tasks that were failing to draw the English working class. Behind both praise and blame lay fundamental differences in attitude towards time, labour, and even towards the physical body. Though the journey from a farm in the west of Ireland to London or Birmingham or Coventry was short, a vast distance was covered in the move from a still broadly pre-modern rural culture and community to modern, urban, industrial society. Much ink was spilt on both sides of the Irish sea on the need for (and dangers of) 'adaptation' to modernity, rather as though the Irish migrant was a member of a race which was threatened with extinction, and indeed the danger of 'race suicide' was never far from the language of conservative Irish commentators on the emigration crisis.

The difficulty for many of the poorer migrants was that they had been given none of the tools which might make adaptation possible – few were educated beyond the age of fourteen; many had experienced the world of paid employment only through seasonal agricultural work and odd jobs.¹⁰ The lucky ones who got themselves apprenticed to a trade in Ireland were able to find themselves better jobs, if not necessarily higher earnings, when it inevitably came time for them too to emigrate. They generally did rather better in England. But there were plenty who argued that, almost for that very reason, it was better not to equip the Irish poorer classes with skills other than those that would fit them for life in an agricultural society. To train them as carpenters and fitters and mechanics was to train them for the boat. Irish men and women came up against a highly developed class system in Britain, exacerbated in many cases by racial stereotyping and – though they did not suffer to the extent of black migrants – racial discrimination. But they had been primed for it by an equally pernicious, if less visible, rigid social stratification at home – one in which their place was most often on the bottom. Irish parliamentary politics was not, and is not, determined by class in the way that it is in Britain. But the division

¹⁰ Education in itself was no failsafe against emigration. In John McGahern's *The Dark*, the scholarship boys from the small farms know as their final exams approach that the options are either to 'get high honours, or go to England' (p. 118).

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between what one historian has called ‘the possessing classes’ and ‘the more vulnerable classes’ was inescapable for all that.¹¹ The emigration of vast numbers of young Irish poor was regarded at best with complacency by those a few rungs higher on the social ladder, in safe jobs themselves. Some were happy to spell it out: it was only by ridding the country of large numbers of the unemployed that social revolution, or even social change, could be avoided. At their worst, Irish official attitudes towards the emigrants layered smugness on top of moral censure. The men and women who left Ireland in the ’50s were turning their backs on a bleak future, with little prospect of steady employment, or marriage and homes of their own. They were castigated for their folly in abandoning the purity of Irish rural life in favour of the dangers of urban society, and for their greed in daring to prefer a disposable income of their own to slaving for a pittance on the family holding. Their moral failings were indistinguishable from national ones, for those not content with the frugal lifestyle available to them at home were guilty of deserting their nation. It took the major economic crisis of the mid-’50s, when the numbers of emigrants exceeded all previous records, and the sons and daughters of the better-off were also forced to take the boat, for attitudes to shift. For a time in the mid-’60s it was London teams (with London specially designated an Irish county) which took the All-Ireland trophies in the Junior Championships of the Gaelic Football league – there can have been few more damning indictments of the project of national independence.¹²

The migrants themselves – however much they may have eagerly embraced the materialistic society which offered them a living wage, the possibility of a home, healthcare, marriage, and education for their children – stayed oddly silent about the iniquitous social system which had forced them out. There were plenty of people ready with recollections of stuck-up local priests, self-important teachers, or arrogant employers in the farms, shops and factories they had left. There were some who refused ever to go back. But left-wing groups amongst the Irish in Britain who attempted to spotlight the causes of social injustice at home worked hard to gain support. Most people just wanted to get on with their lives, but they were also marked by the fact that, whatever the shortcomings of life

¹¹ See Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985*, where he argues that ‘the interests of the possessing classes came to pivot crucially around emigration’ (p. 374).

¹² The GAA saw London as key during this era, to the point that they hired Wembley Stadium from 1958–75 for an annual exhibition game, featuring two of the strongest Irish counties in both hurling and football. See Pat Griffin, *Gaelic Hearts: A History of London GAA, 1896–1996* (London: London Co. Board Gaelic Athletic Association, 2011); Mike Cronin, Mark Duncan and Paul Rouse, *The GAA: A People’s History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009).

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back home, they had lost it for good. Donall Mac Amhlaigh, who left Kilkenny in 1951, described a perspective probably shared by the majority of migrants.

I knew that I'd miss the small ordinary things that I had been used to for so long: the company and the kind chat with the lads down at the corner every night; the good-fellowship and the gaiety of the poor people in the 'four-pennies' at the pictures on pay night; and the excellence of the pints in Larry's after closing time.¹³

They lived in the fissures between the knowable rural communities which had forced them out, and the urban industrial environment which allotted them a place, and they were not about to reject the past that had formed them. As one commentator has put it, 'many of the victims would continue to cherish the values responsible for their own plight.'¹⁴ After all, they were leaving communities where the sense of belonging and kinship was in part derived from those values, where communal bonds often appeared to be at odds with the affluence associated with industrial society, even to be intensified by adversity. Thus the emigrants carried with them pride in the nation that had failed to provide for them. In time this was to develop into a sentimental attachment to their Irishness, and a nostalgia for home which was fed by annual holidays, and social gatherings fuelled by music and dance and drink. The word 'nostalgia' carries with it all sorts of negative connotations, of unreality, and of kitsch versions of the past. But the need to find ways of treasuring a world to which it was impossible to return was real enough. Part of the story of the Irish in Britain is about how the emptied-out Irish countryside became filled with meanings and associations which continue to determine our understanding of Ireland today. It is no accident that many of our stereotypes of Ireland focus on the characteristics of its people, for all that they were no longer there.

From the end of the war until the mid-'60s the Irish kept on coming. How they fared, and the likelihood of whether or not they would 'settle', changed dramatically over that time. By the mid-1960s the stark opposition between traditional and commercial ways of life had begun to break down, particularly in the increasingly urban environment of Dublin. The Anglo-Irish Trade Agreement of 1965 signalled the end of economic protectionism. Industrial development and the educational reforms of the 1960s created an entirely new economic situation for both the migrant

¹³ Donall Mac Amhlaigh, *An Irish Navy: The Diary of an Exile*, trans. Valentine Iremonger (Cork: Collins Press, 2003 [1964]), p. 3.

¹⁴ Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985*, p. 385.

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and the Irish person who chose to stay at home. Industrial progress in Ireland, and the expansion of secondary education towards the end of the decade, began to improve prospects for the young in search of work, and would eventually narrow the economic gap between the two countries. The advent of an Irish television service in 1961–2, though it was slow to expand into more rural areas, had a huge impact on a still relatively isolated society, as did the back-and-forth movement of the emigrants themselves. ‘Traditional’ Irish farming culture had long been underpinned by emigrant remittances which furthered a dependent relationship between the two economies. Now, in a strange twist, the empty rural landscape which was one result of emigration became the basis for a new form of commercial exploitation of the Irish in Britain. The emigrant Irish were encouraged to spend their money on nostalgic returns to the unspoilt landscapes which had failed to offer them a livelihood, returning to Britain at the end of the summer with a lump of Connemara marble in their pockets, and the imprint of the Blarney stone upon their lips.

These pages do not offer a social history of Irish emigration to Britain but attempt to access the lived experience beneath that history through an analysis of representations.¹⁵ They are informed by a belief in the power of representations – from literary images to social stereotypes to the core assumptions of both Irish and British public opinion – to shape our understanding of experience, at some level to shape experience itself. The attempt to access experience, or even ‘history’, through representation may seem misguided, or doomed to failure, and it probably deserves further explanation.¹⁶ There have been several absorbing studies of post-war Irish migration in recent years. Mary Daly’s analysis of the social and economic background to Ireland’s emigration crisis, and the political responses to it, has informed my discussion of the discourses of emigration, just as the work of sociologists, geographers and historians such as Mary Hickman,

¹⁵ For the social and economic history of post-war Irish emigration, see Enda Delaney, *The Irish in Post-War Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and *Demography, State and Society: Irish Migration to Britain, 1921–1971* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000); Mary E. Daly, *The Slow Failure: Population Decline and Independent Ireland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Ultan Cowley, *The Men Who Built Britain* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2004); John Archer Jackson, *The Irish in Britain* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1963); Kevin O’Connor, *The Irish in Britain* (London: Sidgewick and Jackson, 1972). For sociologically informed approaches see Mary Hickman, *Religion, Class and Identity: The State, the Church and the Education of the Irish in Britain* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1995) and Bronwen Walter, *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place and Irish Women* (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁶ For an influential discussion of theory and methodology in relation to this issue see Joan W. Scott, ‘The Evidence of Experience’, *Critical Inquiry* 17:4 (1991), pp. 773–797.

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Bronwen Walter and Enda Delaney lies behind my interpretation of representations of Irish immigrants in Britain. But there are interesting tensions between the sociological and historical approaches. In 2007 Delaney argued for the need for a detailed historical narrative of the settlement of the Irish, to set alongside theoretically informed social science research on migration and diaspora. Insisting that there was 'no universal historical experience of being Irish in post-war Britain',¹⁷ his study emphasises the diversity rather than uniformity of individual migrant experiences, accessed through documentary sources but also oral history, memoir and other forms of personal testimony.

Delaney's concern to uncover the heterogeneity of Irish migrant experience is well taken, and he delivers an impressive, multi-faceted account of the history to which I am indebted. Yet the fact that the experiences were different but the stories told about the emigrant and immigrant Irish were remarkably similar is something that requires elucidation. Why, despite actual differences in social background and social outcome for individual migrants, did ideas, opinions and representations of Irish migrants turn on such a narrow range of stock formations? Part of the reason is that there were 'majority' experiences, at least in the early phase of post-war migration: for the migrants themselves this included leaving rural or small-town communities for large urban industrial centres, working in factories or hospitals, or as construction workers, and being Catholic in a non-Catholic country; for employers, landlords and 'the English' in general there was a similarly narrow range of forms of encounter, in the workplace, in digs, in pubs, in dancehalls, and for English Catholics, at mass. But part of the reason is that the ways in which these experiences could be interpreted had already been framed within a set of narratives and stereotypes derived principally from Victorian discourses of Celticism, related Revivalist idealisations of rural Ireland, and modernising Catholic discourses of (primarily female) Irish purity and respectability. Put crudely, the experiences of individual Irish emigrants were overlaid by and fed back into fantasies, or to use a term with different connotations, ideologies, of emigration, which helped shape the ways in which those experiences could be understood. The impulse to explore the mentality of migration cannot afford to ignore the ways in which both the emigrants' understanding of their own situation, and the responses of the British population to them, were bounded not only by their social and economic situations, but also by a set of inherited tropes, amongst

¹⁷ Delaney, *Irish in Post-War Britain*, p. 5.