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THE BEST ARE LEAVING

Clair Wills's *The Best Are Leaving* is a wide-ranging study of post-war Irish emigrant culture. Wills analyses representations of emigrants from Ireland and of Irish immigrants in Britain across a range of discourses, including official documents, sociological texts, clerical literature, journalism, drama, literary fiction, and popular literature and film. A leading critic of Irish literature and culture, Wills explores a number of received opinions about post-war emigration from Ireland, and the immigrant Irish community in Britain: the loss of the finest people from rural Ireland, and the destruction of traditional communities; the anxieties associated with women emigrants and their desire for the benefits of modern consumer society; the stereotype of the drunken, fighting Irishman; the charming and authentic country Irish in the city; the physical strength of the labouring Irish; the ambiguous meanings of Irish Catholicism in England, both a threatening and a civilising force. She asks why – despite the differences in social background and social outcome for individual migrants – ideas, opinions and representations of the Irish turned on a relatively narrow range of stereotypes. And she analyses the deployment of those stereotypes by writers and artists such as M. J. Molloy, John B. Keane, Edna O'Brien, Tom Murphy, Donall Mac Amhlaigh, Anthony Cronin, and Philip Donnellan.

Clair Wills is professor of Irish literature at Queen Mary University of London. Previous publications include *That Neutral Island: A History of Ireland during the Second World War* (2007) and *Dublin 1916: The Siege of the GPO* (2009).

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CLAIR WILLS

Queen Mary University of London

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For Claire Connolly

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spring of 2012. This provided a great opportunity to discuss emigrant texts with a lively and creative group of graduates, including Evan Bryson, Kara Donnelly, Lindsay Haney, Katy Lattari, Robinson Murphy and Nathaniel Myers. Thanks too to Jacob, Luan and Philomena Wills for their patience and good humour.

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Preface

On occasional Sunday afternoons when I was about eight or nine, we children would climb into the back of the Vauxhall Viva ready for my father to drive the hour and a half or so from our home in Croydon to a pub in Shepherds Bush. There my mother would meet her brothers. For me and my sisters these were afternoons of strangeness, if not quite adventure – for a start we were released from the usual purgatory of being left to squabble in the back of the car whilst our parents went for a drink. By some process I judged similar to the territorial reach of Western Europe into West Berlin, the pubs in Shepherds Bush appeared to be outposts of Irish legal terrain so that children were allowed in the bar. There we were treated to endless bottles of red lemonade and packets of Tayto crisps by uncles whose kindness, in the face of our relative unfamiliarity, was just a little bit frightening. At least that is my memory. My eldest sister remembers it differently – as a series of visits to dingy, depressing pubs peopled by men nursing their pints in silence. The afternoons were long and I remember them as awkward. I was used to going 'home' to Ireland every summer, and felt at ease with my cousins and uncles and aunts in West Cork. These London uncles were different – both quieter and harder to know, and louder in company. And there was always the moment, no easier to handle because anticipated, when they would press money into your hand and you would need to be grateful and pleased, as you were, but to make only just the right amount of fuss about saying thank-you.

The awkwardness was not just that of a young girl around grown men. What I chiefly remember about those visits is the journey there and back by car, a journey defined by what I now realise was my mother's edginess. The siblings had left the small farm near Skibbereen within a few years of each other, in the late 1940s and early '50s. But in fifteen years my mother's life had changed almost beyond recognition. She had trained as a general nurse in the newly formed National Health Service, a process which proved a happy meeting between her own desire for change and

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opportunities for social mobility. Though social aspiration had been no part of a conscious plan – she wanted to travel, and to widen her experience – she made a success of things. A little more than six years after her arrival she had married a local. We lived in a semi-detached house; we had a car; we took annual holidays to Ireland and occasionally even to France; we girls would eventually pass the eleven-plus and go on to university. Apart from the fact that we were Catholic, and nurtured a sentimental attachment to our Irishness, fuelled each summer by our trips 'home', and sustained during the year by listening to Percy French, wearing scratchy Aran sweaters, and baking soda bread, we seemed entirely integrated into English middle-class society. Indeed our Catholicism was proof that my mother's emigration from Ireland had not been a success merely in terms of her own life. If she had cared to dwell on it, she might have reflected that she was a symbol of success too for the Irish church, which in the '50s liked to stress that though emigration was a social evil it might yet be turned into a force for moral good if the Irish 'boys and girls' who left the country by the thousands could be encouraged to bring round the pagan country across the channel. For when my father fell in love with her he fell for the whole lot, Catholicism and all, and converted.

English husband aside, my mother's story is fairly typical of small-farm girls who migrated to Britain in the '50s. There were few, if any, opportunities for girls of her station in rural Ireland beyond domestic service, or work in a shop or small factory if they were lucky. Four out of every five children born in Ireland between 1931 and 1941 emigrated in the 1950s.[1] More than half a million people (from a population of less than three million) left the country between 1945 and 1960. And unlike most European countries, where it was predominantly young men who migrated for work, just as many Irish women as men left home – in some years rather more women than men. Of every hundred girls in the province of Connacht aged fifteen to nineteen in 1946, forty-two had left by 1951.[2] Many of them went into factories, or worked in transport, particularly in the midlands, and a fair proportion trained as nurses. Precisely because nursing in Ireland was still the preserve of well-off farmers' daughters (the training was fee-paying) it retained the professional cachet it was losing in England, where it was becoming associated with hard work and low status. For the many young women without school qualifications who could nonetheless train

[1] J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 379.
[2] Ibid., p. 377.

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in Britain, nursing offered unparalleled opportunities for a career and wider social horizons.

Her brothers were also fairly typical of their class. Small farmer's sons, with nothing beyond a national school education (secondary education was not to expand for the poorer classes in Ireland until the late '60s), and without specific skills beyond those required for the seasonal work on the farm, there was nothing for them but to join the vast pool of Irish unskilled labour which contributed to rebuilding Britain after the war. Many of our stereotypes of the Irish worker in post-war Britain derive from this navvying class. These were men who worked 'on the lump', queuing for work on the building sites on street corners in the early morning, who were paid into the hand at the end of the week, who lived in overcrowded digs and spent their free time in the pub where they drank their pay. Many of them didn't marry; they didn't save, and they didn't 'settle down'; it was marriage itself, almost regardless of to whom, which made the fundamental difference to the immigrants of the 1950s. Unmarried labourers survived their time in England by sticking to their own, barely associating, let alone integrating, with English society; they talked as though they were at any point going to return 'home', but they became increasingly cut off from Irish life through the 1960s. Though the details of any one individual life differed from the stereotype, it was uncomfortably true enough for thousands of Irish men even then. By the time of those Shepherds Bush Sundays it was the late '60s and things were not going to change for my uncles and those like them.

The discomfort I sensed in my mother was not about not wanting to see them. The fondness and anticipation were palpable. Yet her long familiarity with her brothers must have made the consciousness of their different situations acute. The same was true for them, of course – everyone was making an effort to pretend that nothing had changed, that the family at home, neighbours, friends, teachers, authority figures, the whole world they had been brought up to lose, by leaving, was not really lost at all. The good cheer, the remembered stories, the money pressed into the hand, none of it was simply bravado. The sense of injustice was surely bitter, the unfairness of the system – both Irish and British – that had used them and left them behind, impossible to deny. But how could it be acknowledged without condescension towards the lives they had made? It was this feeling I unearthed one day when I asked my mother, 'What does Uncle Thomas do?' Though I can't have been more than ten years old, I vividly remember the slight hesitation and catch in her throat before she answered very deliberately, 'He's a mason.' I had never heard the word

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and asked her to explain it. For a long time afterwards I imagined Uncle Thomas as a sort of medieval craftsman, carving houses. She would not say builder's labourer. It wasn't that she was a snob, though perhaps she thought I was. She wanted me to be proud of him.

The relationship between these recollections and the chapters that follow is, in several respects, straightforward. I began the research for this book wanting to understand more about the worlds in which my relatives had lived their lives, and more about the ways they may have understood their lives. Historical and sociological research has a vital part to play in making intelligible the social, political and cultural forces which structured opportunities and choices for Irish men and women both at home and after they had made the move to Britain, but so too, I believe, does the kind of cultural and literary reading that I offer here. For – and this is where the relationship between my recollections and this study becomes more complex – it is impossible to extricate historical experience from cultural patterns and representational strategies, which shore up fallible memories and help make sense of our experiences. The scenes I have described are events which actually took place, but their importance – the manner in which I have remembered them, and the fact that they seem to speak of experience in telling ways – has to do with the way they echo and reinforce ideas and images of the emigrant Irish. This book is an attempt to trace the evolution of some of these ideas in the documentary and creative literature of the 1950s and '60s. It is about misrecognition and misunderstanding as much as it is about knowledge and awareness. Experience, after all, is just as dependent on confusion as it is on clarity. The writers, artists, journalists and politicians I discuss were all attempting to be historians of contemporary experience, and the doubled perspective of blind participant and detached observer structures a great many of their responses to emigrant and immigrant life. What might feel like the privileged position of the 'insider', knowing from personal experience at least something of the worlds of the post-war migrants, is put in question but not negated by the evidence and information gleaned from external sources. One contemporary critic called it knowing 'from the inside out', and it is a practice I have tried to learn from the fiction, drama, film and painting which are my subject.

I offer here an analysis of stock formations: the shaping typologies of emigrant and immigrant experience. The chapters track a number of received discourses which formed a core of public opinion about post-war emigration from Ireland and the immigrant Irish community in Britain: the loss of the finest people from rural Ireland and the destruction of

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traditional communities; the anxieties associated with women emigrants and their desire for the benefits of modern consumer society; the stereotype of the drunken, fighting Irishman; the charming and authentic country Irish in the city; the ambiguous meanings of Irish Catholicism in England, both a threatening and a civilising force. None of these cultural formations remained fixed during the period, and, as the history of 'actual' migrant experience shows, many were widely off the mark. Yet precisely because they may have been in some basic historical sense 'wrong', and failed to offer an accurate picture of migrant life as it was evolving, the remarkable persistence of these formulaic patterns deserves exploration. These pages explore ideas, images and stereotypes of Irish ethnicity as they were employed by a range of writers and thinkers responding to post-war emigration from Ireland and immigrant experience in Britain. Their focus is on the ways in which inherited tropes and stock formations were deployed at a moment of historical crisis and significant social change. The challenge is to acknowledge the culturally determined nature of these representations, and at the same time to account for their historical specificity, to find a way to revisit the history of immigration which both admits and resists the shaping power of culture, which both reads, and reads through, stereotypical representation.

In paying attention to the formation of types and stereotypes, I ask how some experiences became more salient than others, how some stock formations became embedded, as ways of understanding experience, and others did not. In attempting to trace a genealogy of these formations I am wary of the danger of collapsing distinctions between 'lived experience' and the forms in which it is represented – wary of a thoroughgoing type of linguistic determinism, the idea that subjects (and their experiences) are produced discursively. But I do maintain that 'typification' and 'stereotypification' were part of lived experience for emigrants and immigrants, and that this stratum of experience may be opened up to interpretation by a critical reading of the literature.

A further word on the literature, and the practice of critical reading I bring to it, may be in order here. My study of official documents, essays, journalism, drama, fiction and film has been directed at analysing the various ways in which they deploy emigrant typologies, and interpreting the echoes and dialogues between them. Arguably my approach risks flattening out the distinctions between different forms of discourse, and it is true that part of my argument in this book is in favour of a practice of critical reading which can acknowledge the dynamic and symbiotic relationship between texts which were produced with very different purposes,

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and indeed audiences, in mind. I am interested in overlaps, resonances, and borrowings – in the distorted forms in which discursive patterns can cross from one type of text to another, and in the insights which can be gained from tracking those echoes and distortions. But I do not deny that self-conscious borrowing, and deliberate distortion – strategies characteristic of literary texts – provide a form of knowledge of a different order. The literary texts I analyse here do not purvey stereotypes (in the way that Irish clerical warnings about the dangers of emigration, or British commentaries on the wild Irish immigrant do) so much as interrogate them and put them to use. In so doing they offer up the relationship between discursive formations and lived experience for our understanding, allowing us to see and interpret the stuff of which they, and we, are made.

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