

‘I’ve Won a Hero’s Name’: Stereotyping the Post-war Irish Builders and Mythologizing the Mundane

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The quote in the title of this paper is the opening line of Dominic Behan’s well-known folk-song, officially entitled *Paddy on the Road* – but much better known by its popular title *Building up and tearing England down*. Dominic was the younger brother of Brendan and Brian, and was himself an author and playwright but was probably better-known as a songwriter who came to prominence in the 1960s Irish folk revival. The full first verse merits examination as it précises succinctly the theme of this paper, which is the way in which the Irish migrant builders who participated in the post-war reconstruction of London performed a specific stereotypical version of male Irishness.

I’ve won a hero’s name with McAlpine and Costain,
With Fitzpatrick, Murphy, Ashe and Wimpey’s gang,
I’ve been often on the road on my way to draw the dole,
When there’s nothing left to do for Johnny Laing,
I used to think that God made the mixer, pick and hod,
So that Paddy might know hell above the ground,
I’ve had gangers big and tough tell me tear it all out rough,
When you’re building up and tearing England down¹

The song first featured as the title track of Christy Moore’s debut album in 1969, and is one of a number of significant cultural products which shaped the master narrative of Irish builders in post-war London. It is an example of what might be termed the stereotyping of the Irish by the Irish. Behan borrowed heavily from seasonal and wartime migrant Irish work-culture, for example in his re-writing of the original version

¹ The late Frank Harte (1933-2005), a noted folklorist and song collector included this song as ‘Paddy on the Road’ in *Songs of Dublin*, (ed.), 1978, Gilbert Dalton, Dublin and 1993, Ossian Publications, Cork. The Dubliners recorded the song under the better known title of the chorus line ‘Building Up and Tearing England Down’ on their albums *Prodigal Sons* and *Live in Carré*, in 1983.

of another famous navy-song *McAlpine's Fusiliers*, but also in his original songs such as this, which entered popular culture in Ireland and in the clustered Irish communities of London with such resonance that by the end of the century they became the dominant narrative of the Irish builder's experience in the second half of the twentieth century.

It is appropriate to start by establishing who the post-war Irish builders were. During World War Two British government recruitment campaigns (undertaken with the tacit approval of de Valera's wartime administration) saw thousands of young men come to Britain to undertake essential wartime agricultural, industrial, construction and civil engineering works (Delaney, 2000, 119–125). These men were predominantly from the rural west of Ireland and had been culturized into a pre-existing tradition of seasonal agricultural and navy migration. After the War, once travel restrictions were lifted and the common travel area reinstated many of these men stayed as the huge and urgent demand for labour to rebuild Britain began to create plentiful employment opportunities. This, in turn, triggered an extensive pattern of chain-migration – from all counties in Ireland but predominantly from the west – and predominantly to London, which persisted at least until the early 1970s. These migrants – men and women who came in more-or-less equal numbers, indeed women slightly outnumbered men initially – have been labelled the *Mailboat Generation* (Murray, 2012, 39). Whilst women tended to go mainly into nursing or retail or domestic work, the overwhelming majority of men in that generation worked in the construction and civil-engineering industries as manual operatives.

This paper seeks to consider some of the ways in which Irish cultural production can be seen to have mediated the anecdotal experiences of its migrant construction workers. The result of these cultural representations was to create a master narrative which focuses on the veneration of physical labour as the primary measure of Irish masculinity alongside lifestyle excesses – primarily alcohol and gambling, social and working recklessness, ethnic insularity and clannishness and ultimately an innate sense – and fear – of socio-economic inadequacy. In one sense the rhetorical anxieties reflected by the mailboat migrants, in particular their resistance to any form of assimilation into British culture and society, can be seen as a legacy of the Irish

revolutionary generation of whom they were, for the most part, first-generation descendants.

Sociologist Mary Hickman has argued that alongside the ‘rich ignorant Irish-American’, the stereotypes of the ‘mobile entrepreneurial adventurer’ and the ‘down-on-his-luck labourer’ are the major archetypes of the Irish diaspora in Britain within the popular Irish imagination (Scully, 2015, 133–148). I contend further that Irish collective cultural memory – diffused through performative Irishness: in the forms of folklore, myth, literature, folk-song and drama – has constantly re-cycled, romanticised and mythologised the life-experiences of the ‘typical’ post-war migrant construction worker based on these stereotypes. The effect of this process is broadly similar to what Mark Scully terms the ‘*rhetorical invocation*’ of transnational collective post-memory (Scully, 2015, 134).

Whilst much of the heroic myth and folklore which underpins the metanarrative is undoubtedly rooted in fact and based upon some real characters, my contention remains that it is far from being representative of the wide range of experiences actually encountered by most of these migrant builders in London. The central question which my own doctoral research attempts to answer is whether the verifiable factual experiences of Irish migrant males in the London construction industry align with these cultural representations; or put another way – are these Irishmen the ‘forgotten Irish’ as often depicted by literary and, more recently, news media representations – ill-educated, exploited, ‘down-on-their luck navvies’ – or are they instead the ‘mis-remembered’ Irish?

In methodological terms the research draws upon a wide variety of primary archival, journalistic and documentary sources including pre-existing interviews and newspaper records and a wide array of secondary literature. However, key to the verification of actual experiences by contrast to cultural representations of the period are twenty to twenty-five original field interviews conducted over the research period as semi-structured oral interviews with a variety of postwar builders and civil engineers who migrated from Ireland to Britain drawn from personal contact networks, snowball sampling and referrals. These interviews corroborate the importance of the various ‘Gaelic’ masculinities to the performance of ‘Irishness’ within the post-war migrant

construction-work community whilst also demonstrating that the effects of this performative culture were transitory and in most cases the propensity to itinerancy, casualization, 'lump' working and reckless endangerment were features of the assimilation process of newly-arrived migrants into the working culture of the ethnic enclave of Irish construction workers. As such these features of the Irish migrant experience became permanent in a relatively small proportion of the London-Irish ethnic enclave, with the vast majority of men eventually becoming settled into domestic urban life, returning to Ireland regularly and maintaining links with their families, often becoming householders and raising families and maintaining a relatively stable social position.

E.P Thompson, back in the 1960s, sought to rescue the English working class from what he ironically called 'the enormous condescension of posterity' (Thompson, 1963, 12). Do not the anonymous Irish who came to reconstruct London after the war deserve the same treatment? The oft-exaggerated cultural representations of Irish builders engender, I contend, a false sense of exceptionalism in the story of Ireland's migrant builders. Enda Delaney asserted that 'the besetting sin of all historical writing is myopia [... its] close relative is the unshakeable doctrine of exceptionalism: the assumption that each nation's history is, by definition, *sui generis*' (Delaney, 2011, 599). This can certainly be applied to the myths and folktales of the Irish builder in London. It is important therefore that historical methodology and 'the austere passion for fact, proof and evidence, which are central' to good history serve as a corrective to cultural myth (Yerushalmi, 1982, 116). That said, it is equally important to recognise, as Luke Gibbons has remarked, that 'Understanding a community or a culture does not consist solely in establishing 'neutral' facts and 'objective' details: it means taking seriously their ways of structuring experience, their popular narratives, the distinctive manner in which they frame the social and political realities which affect their lives' (Gibbons, 1991, 95–113). So, as always, there is a balance to be struck between representation and reality.

Until very recently the existing official and 'academic' histories of both Ireland and Britain have given scant relevance to the working experiences of the post-war Irish builders. Indeed there are no academically-driven histories which examine this cohort

from any analytical or theoretical perspective; rather their lives have been what Roy Foster termed a 'subject too often dealt with by means of second-hand narrative and unexamined clichés' (Foster, 2012). As a result, the London-Irish community abounds with tales of the *Cuchulainn* characters of this generation; men with epic nicknames like 'The Bear' O'Shea, Darkie Finn, 'The Horse' McGurk' and 'Elephant' John. Yet these men exist in something of a historical vacuum; except for some fairly biased and non-specific surveillance records made by the Irish government during and immediately after the war, they are recorded almost entirely by way of oral transmission and communal memory.

In terms of literary representations, there is now a well-developed genre of Irish builder or navy narratives which re-conjure some of the more dramatic tropes of working life 'on the shovel' amidst these 'pathfinder migrants' – the first waves to come to London during and immediately after the war. Some of the core folklore seems to echo the post-revolutionary 'official' discourses of Catholic bourgeois Ireland; wrapped up in rural fundamentalism and the heroics of nationalist, Gaelic revolution. As such they tend to reinforce the stereotypes of hegemonic and martial masculinities deriving from these ideologies; epic warlike tales of hard-living, hard fighting and hard drinking amongst and between Donegal's 'Tunnel-tigers', 'McAlpine's Fusiliers', 'Murphy's Rangers' and the 'Pincher laddies' have been encapsulated in songs and stories, remediated through these fictional retellings which, for the most part, have been created by writers and dramatists at a significant temporal and cultural remove from the original sources. Are such representations simply an example of the fabled Irish penchant for creating 'heroes of renown' out of the mundanities of working life? What is certain from research is that self-identity within the London-Irish industrial proletariat is inextricably linked with this complex pastiche of cultural myth and urban folklore. Therefore oral life-histories derived from semi-structured interviews with the migrants themselves, in my view, offer a vital source of primary and comparative evidence together with the wide range of archival information sources available.

Irish migration to London has a long history stretching back centuries, but the immediate post-war impetus for the Mailboat migration, in terms of 'pull factors' was the physical destruction wrought upon the city by the Second World War, and the Blitz

in particular. Moreover, the temporary vacuum which war shortages caused in technological progress and labour-saving mechanisation within civilian industry created an urgent need for large quantities of physically robust and capable manual labour.

In broad terms, one third of the Irish-born population of Britain lived in London throughout the mid-Twentieth century (Delaney, 2007, 89). Just under 50% of this group were male and of these it can be safely reckoned that 70–80% worked in construction and civil engineering. Post-war demand was such that London's Irish population virtually doubled between 1931 and 1951 with approximately 225,000 Irish living in the Greater London Metropolis by then (Delaney, 2007, 89).² By 1966, according to census returns, there were c.288, 000 Irish-born living in London (Hall, 2016, 562). A third-wave of Irish migration to Britain in the 1980s was identified by Bronwyn Walter as being even more London-centric, with the proportion of young Irish migrants living in London rising from 32% to 47% between 1981 and 1991 (Walter, 1997, 62). Add to this the London-born, second-generation children of the Mailboat diaspora which has been estimated to outnumber their parents by 50% and many of whom followed their fathers into construction and engineering, and one reliable estimate puts the London-Irish population at c.700'000 by 1971 (Soroan, 2012, 6). Whilst these are inevitably approximations, interpolating these various statistics suggests that the average number of 'London-Irish' builders over the post-war period varied between 150 and 200 thousand; overwhelmingly men.

Immediately after the War, in 1947, the British government abandoned unionised time-based wage agreements across the construction and civil engineering industry in favour of what was termed 'Payment by Results' (Clarke et al., 2012, 57–60). This encouraged the rapid growth of casualised labour-only subcontracting. This informal contracting system became euphemistically known as 'The Lump' and was often characterised by unwritten, informal gang-labour arrangements, payments in cash – thus staying outside the framework of statutory tax and social welfare systems

² Interpolated from remark by Enda Delaney (2007), *The Irish in Post-war Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 89.

(something of critical importance to young Irishmen in Britain before 1957, as it enabled them to avoid conscription for National Service in the Crown Forces) – and careless, indeed often reckless attitudes to work method and health and safety considerations driven by the imperative to rapid completion and maximised productivity. Around this period, in the early 1950s the iconic Irish firms, Murphy, McNicholas, RSK and Lowery, amongst others, began trading as subcontractors. Was this mere coincidence? More likely it was the inevitable result of merging deregulation of construction employment via ‘the Lump’ with the short-term socio-economic aspirations of the Mailboat Generation – then overwhelmingly made up of young, single, recalcitrant Irishmen whose primary ambition was to make enough money to buy a farm at home as quickly as possible by whatever means.

By the early 1960s a vast expanding network of formal and informal subcontractors and casualised labour-only gangs was developing, bringing with it a significant sub-culture of Irishness within the London construction sector. At the top of this hierarchy, five families of brothers, Murphy, McNicholas, Clancy, Byrne and Carey (although there were dozens more) had all established thriving civil engineering companies to capitalise on the explosion in infrastructure projects feeding the expanding metropolis with power, gas, water, road and rail networks all becoming vital to London’s recovery. Irish manual workers’ willingly acquiesced in the development of ‘Lump’ labour-only subcontracting because it suited the fundamentally rural petty-bourgeois capitalist mindset with which they had been raised.

By the mid-1960s these migrant builders had begun to settle as a community in London, although the stereotypical perception of them, both in Britain and Ireland, remained as a highly itinerant ‘navvy’ workforce. By this time they were actually highly mobile but no longer itinerant in the sense applied to the nineteenth-century navvies and certainly did not see themselves as navvies. That lifestyle had more-or-less died out by the end of World War One. These new migrants had often become semi-skilled or skilled tradesmen or self-motivated entrepreneurs who moved with specific projects. With some minor exceptions, the work-camps of the 1940s and 50s were largely replaced by digs and lodging houses. Also many workers from the 60s onwards

commuted to/from work in London and the south-east because of rapidly modernised road and rail infrastructure and the expansion in private vehicle ownership.

A notable feature of the Irish migratory experience in London which became subject to stereotyping was the transfer of rural cultural traditions, customs and practices into the receiving community. Many migrant interviewees anecdotally report never having felt more Irish than when they were living in Britain. The speed of cultural change within their new environment was constantly mediated by a sense that altering or abandoning the customs of 'home' was somehow a betrayal of their Irishness; despite the recognition by most of the post-war migrants that Ireland as a state had, in reality, failed them in economic and social terms. The majority of these builders – particular those who migrated from the early 1940s to the late 1970s were the children of the Free State and latterly the Republic; the first generations to be educated under an independent, Catholic, nationalist state education system which imbued its children with an ultra-patriotic worldview of Britain as the 'old enemy'.

According to Roy Foster, 'emigration was not interpreted as a rational, individualist alternative, but as evidence of British disruption of the Irish way of life.... A race-memory of exploitation, oppression and banishment flourished long after these concepts had become anachronistic' (Foster, 1989, 370). This version of cultural patriotism inevitably dominated the consciousness of Irish male identity in Britain, thereby promoting cultural and social insularity amongst the migrants working in construction and engineering. One female migrant interviewee encapsulated the contradiction of the migrant experience in Britain in stark terms: 'In a sense we were taught to hate. We were taught this history, you were sorta [sic] taught to hate England and then sent there' (Lambert, 2001, 88).³ In short, for most of the post-war Irish builders – mainly from west of the Shannon and raised on a diet of bourgeois rural fundamentalism, post-revolutionary zealotry and Catholic dogma – London was perceived as *economically necessary but culturally toxic*.

³ Enda Delaney (2007), *The Irish in Post-war Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 56, citing an interviewee in Sharon Lambert (2001), *Irish Women in Lancashire, 1922–1960: Their Story*, Lancaster: Lancaster University Press, p. 88

Running counter to the development in popular Irish-British culture of this 'stereotypical' Irish builder, the introspective zeitgeist of the 1950s and 60s amongst significant numbers of these post-war immigrants saw the development of an urban – but highly insular – sub-culture which transplanted and adapted their traditions of religious observance, sporting activity, traditional music, dance, song and modes of social engagement from the rural communities of the Irish western seaboard.⁴ This led to a marked sense of double-consciousness for a significant proportion of the Irish male community involved in construction.

For many, the outward-facing working persona of the hyper-masculine, hard-drinking, hard-fighting wild-rover, conforming in all respects to Fitzpatrick's 'model industrial proletariat' (Fitzpatrick, 1984, 32) and Hickman's *adventurer-labourer stereotype*, concealed a more mundane ethnocentric social life of dogmatic religious observance, weekend Gaelic sports and an aesthetic of traditional art forms – especially music and dance – together with rural customs and practices. For example, the Catholic Church together with organisations such as the Gaelic League, Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann, and The Pioneer Association positively promoted temperance, cultural conservatism and Gaelicisation amongst the London-Irish. These ostensibly contrary identities co-existed functionally in the ordinary lives of the Irish construction worker because, as Clair Wills has pointedly observed [quote] 'For male migrants in particular, building work and the landscape of reconstruction were not [just] the background to personal stories, but the [very] fabric of their lives. Construction sites were, at once, their workplace and one of the locations of their community' (Wills, 2015, 111) .

Conclusion

Almost all of the oral histories I have relied upon in my research – whether pre-existing archival interviews or my own original field work – reference at least some of the

⁴ Reg Hall has extensively researched this transfer of rural music practice into post-war London – see Reg Hall, *A Few Tunes of Good Music: A History of Irish Music and Dance in London, 1800–1980 & Beyond*, (London, 2016).

stereotypical traits and scenarios remediated in Irish cultural representations of the period, usually as folktales and stories from the sites and the pubs of Irish London. However, the detail of their own individual personal experiences tends to show that the typical post-war Irish migrant builder who came to London after the 1950s did not in fact experience a work-life or social-life trajectory which was dominated by these stereotypes. Crucially, however, in most instances they learnt to *perform* those stereotypes when encouraged to do so by the constraints of their hyper-masculine existence within the ethnic enclave of London Irishmen *on the buildings*.

This learnt behaviour in relation to the automatic activation of stereotypes of Irishness is analogous in some ways to psychological research carried out in the 1990s on African-American stereotyping which concluded that the unconscious behavioural confirmation processes involved led to self-fulfilling consequences of stereotype re-activation; in other words a mutually-reinforcing cycle which explains, to some extent, why such stereotypes are so resistant to change (Chen and Bargh, 1997, 541). The American oral historian Linda Shopes asserts that by 'recording multiple, contradictory stories across a spectrum...' we can trust the power of these stories to '...communicate broader social truths' (Shopes, 2015, 97). In doing so, it is hoped that eventually a proper balance can be struck between the irresistibility of Irish heroic storytelling as cultural myth and the (sometimes unavoidably mundane) realism of the Irish migrant builder's existence in London.

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