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SECTION III:
SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CELEBRATING IRISHNESS IN LONDON

GRÁINNE O'KEEFFE-VIGNERON

Introduction

This article will trace how expressions of Irish culture in London have evolved in the period following the Second World War, going from celebrations which took place within the confines of the Irish community in the 1950s and 1960s to more public and open articulations of an Irish identity thirty years later. This increased visibility of Irish culture has been considered as representing the acceptance of Irish cultural difference in English society and the deconstruction of the Irish in England as a “suspect community”, free now to be full and active members of multicultural Britain.¹

Firstly, the expression of Irishness of the emigrants who came to London in the post World War II period will be examined. Irish cultural events and festivities took place largely within the Irish community where Irish emigrants found protection in a more favourable and familiar environment against the hostility that many encountered on the outside in their day-to-day lives.

Secondly, this paper will examine how expressions of Irish culture began to change throughout the 1980s and come out into the public arena at the same time as members of the Irish community, who were particularly active in London, began to lobby for recognition of the Irish as an “ethnic minority” group. They started to take advantage of the increasingly prevalent multicultural discourse in English society and eventually gained recognition of Irish difference on an official level—the Irish were included for the first time under the “Ethnic Group” category of

¹ John Nagle, (2005), “Everybody’s Irish on St. Patrick’s Day: Ambivalence and Alterity at London’s St. Patrick’s Day 2002”, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, no. 12, 564.

the English Census in 2001—and the first official St Patrick’s Day parade was organised in London in 2002. According to John Nagle the routing of the parade through central London provided a focus for the London Irish community to gain visibility, inclusivity and recognition within London cultural life.² But just how much progress have the Irish really made and what image of Irish culture is now being projected in London society?

This paper will end with an analysis of the results of interviews that were given in four Irish cultural centres in London in February 2006—The *London Irish Centre*, *Haringey Irish Cultural and Community Centre*, *Hammersmith and Fulham Irish Centre* and the *South London Irish Centre*. These interviews had as their principal aim to ascertain the real extent of Irish cultural visibility in London and how the expression of Irishness has evolved since the 1950s and 1960s. Some of the following questions were asked: what have been the main changes experienced by these Irish centres in the last ten to fifteen years? What kind of cultural activities are now on offer in London for the Irish community? Who is taking part in these cultural events? To what extent has the celebration of Irish culture come out into the public arena in London? And what kind of image of Irishness is now being projected in London? This article proposes some answers to these questions.

Staying Amongst Your Own

Between 1951 and 1971, 80% of Irish immigrants went to Britain. In 1951, there were over 715,000 Irish-born people living in Britain. By 1961, this number had increased to over 945,000 people.³ The early emigrants of the 1940s and 1950s were often from rural origins.⁴ From the 1970s onwards, they tended to come from more urban backgrounds, all hoping to leave unemployment and a bleak future in Ireland behind them.

The migrant experience and cultural difference of the Irish was not recognised in official discourse concerning immigrants in Britain in the post World War II period. The Irish as a “white”, “British Isles” population group, with close historical and trade links with Britain, were

² *Ibid.*

³ Bronwen Walter et al. (2002), “A Study of the Existing Sources of Information and Analysis about Irish Emigrants and Irish Communities Abroad”, in Task Force on Policy regarding Emigrants, *Ireland and the Irish Abroad: Report of the Task Force on Policy regarding Emigrants to the Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr. Brian Cowen*, Dublin: Department of Foreign Affairs, 34.

⁴ Gerry Harrison, (2004), *The Scattering: A History of the London Irish Centre, 1954-2004*, London: The London Irish Centre, 11.

excluded from the restrictive immigration legislation introduced in the post-war period which was essentially aimed at limiting immigration from the Commonwealth. This meant that the Irish came to be constructed as an “invisible” minority in official discourse as they were not recognised as an immigrant group despite their large numbers. Nevertheless, this “invisibility” did not protect them from anti-Irish stereotypes and discrimination, which persisted in English society during this period. It was the time of the signs beside offers of employment and accommodation reading *No Irish Need Apply* or *No dogs, Irish or blacks*.⁵

Certain London boroughs like Brent, Camden, Islington, Haringey and Hammersmith and Fulham started to become Irish enclaves as more and more Irish immigrants arrived to participate in the post-war reconstruction boom. These immigrants were young, the typical age was between 20 and 25, and they were mainly single.⁶ Being young, and finding themselves alone for the first time in a large urban agglomeration, the need for them to identify with each other was strong. Sean O’Faolain was even once quoted as saying that even: “when a person left Ireland, even to escape numbing poverty or smotheringly oppressive society, they left with the tentacles of the place knotted around their heart”.⁷ It was very likely then that the immigrants arriving in the 1950s had brought Ireland with them and in many cases had never really left Ireland imagining that one day they would return. Many settled down in the same areas and their social lives in London began to be centred on pubs and dance halls.⁸

One Irish woman said of the social situation for Irish men at that time: “The only place that they could go was the pub. [...]”.⁹ Those who worked on the building sites usually did not have anywhere to go at night. Many landladies only allowed their lodgers to have access to their rooms after a certain time. The pub then became the obvious place for many of them to go to pass the time and to meet others in the same situation as themselves. It was a place where they could socialise with their own nationality. Many Irish men frequented the pubs in Camden town and it is advanced that the first instance of Irish traditional music being played in a pub in England was in the former “Brighton” in Camden High Street.¹⁰

⁵ Tim Pat Coogan, (2000), *Wherever Green is Worn*, London: Hutchinson, 136.

⁶ John A. Jackson, (1963), *The Irish in Britain*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 19.

⁷ Hogan, Joe (1998), *Fogra*, issue 2, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Tim Pat Coogan, (2000), *Wherever Green is Worn*, London: Hutchinson, 138.

¹⁰ Gerry Harrison, (2004), *The Scattering: A History of the London Irish Centre, 1954-2004*, London: The London Irish Centre, 28.

Tea dances were another attraction at this time and these normally took place in the afternoons. At the weekends many Irish men and women spent their evenings at the dancehalls. Showbands from Ireland, which began to emerge in the late 1950s, toured the many Irish venues which had been opened for the large Irish immigrant population in London, places such as the Galtymore, the Estate and the Blarney. In 1955, the Oblate fathers opened the *London Irish Centre* in Camden Town in order to offer a place where help could be sought by those in difficulty and to bring Irish people together in a social setting.¹¹ A social committee was formed and a licence to sell alcohol was obtained. Some organisations made the centre their base and gradually a steady schedule of social events was organised there, for example Bingo, County Bacon and Cabbage Dinners and *Ceilis*.¹² The *London Irish Centre* became a well-known and frequented place by the Irish community who could participate in Irish traditional music and Irish dancing events. The centre even became the headquarters of the *Council of Irish County Associations* in 1961.

These associations were set up at this time for people wishing to meet others from the same county; one of the earliest was the Corkman's association. According to Bridie Shaw, current President of the London Clare Association, the county associations:

[...] were a social outlet. They gave people a reason to get together. At that time people might have been lucky to get home once a year, or every two years, so here was a deep need to meet their own and help each other out.¹³

Another observer remarked that: “[...] in those days the Irish (were) looking to attach themselves to anything that was linked to back home”.¹⁴ These two statements reveal the propensity for Irish people to get together at this time, in a context where they could comfortably express their shared origins. These social gatherings attracted mainly an Irish working-class population.

Those of middle-class origins had opened their own club called the *Irish Club* in Eaton Square in Belgravia in 1948. Apart from business and professional people, its membership was varied, including those from

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹² Author Unknown (1975), *Helping Hands: Outlines of the Origins and Development of the Irish Centre over 21 Years*, London: The London Irish Centre, 18.

¹³ Niall Cunningham, (2000), “Are the Pipes still Calling?” *The Irish Post*, 17 June, 14.

¹⁴ Peter Foley, (2005), “The Times they are a Changing”, *The Irish Post*, 3 December, 12.

theatrical and literary professions such as Cyril Cusack and Brendan Behan. The *Irish Club* was a popular location and many events took place there such as dancing and bridge. Literary, dramatic and debating societies were also based there and offered different types of cultural activities to those found at the *Irish Centre* for example.¹⁵

The 1970s brought the beginning of a more self-conscious and coordinated Irish identity in Britain. According to Breda Gray, it was a time of expansion of points of reference for the Irish in London and a de-centering of the Catholic Church as the main focus for the Irish community.¹⁶ The *Irish Post* newspaper was established in 1970 as: “a rallying point for a sense of community among the Irish in Britain”.¹⁷ The *Federation of Irish Societies* (FIS), established in 1973, was created to promote the interests of the Irish community in Britain. It offered community care, education, culture, arts, youth welfare and information provision.

The FIS was set up just one year before the Birmingham pub bombings of 1974. The media backlash against the Irish that followed did nothing to encourage the open expression of an Irish identity nor did the introduction of the *Prevention of Terrorism Act* (PTA) following the bombings whose indiscriminate use created many problems for Irish citizens in England. The Irish community felt it was under “public surveillance” by both the police and the indigenous population and was constructed as a “suspect community”.¹⁸

The Irish had the advantage of being white and having the possibility of changing their accent or name and denying their Irishness in difficult times.¹⁹ With the increasingly negative media attention it was tempting for Irish people to just ignore their Irishness and merge in. This was probably an understandable reaction for some people who had settled and were now bringing up children in London. Many people had moved out of the traditionally Irish areas by this time and were dispersed around the suburbs of London, losing a sense of solidarity and closeness to Ireland

¹⁵ Author Unknown (1971), *The Irish Club Bulletin*, January, 3.

¹⁶ Breda Gray, (2000), “From ‘Ethnicity’ to ‘Diaspora’: 1980s Emigration and ‘Multicultural’ London”, *The Irish Diaspora*, (ed.) Andy Bielenberg, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 71.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Tim Pat Coogan, (2000), *Wherever Green is Worn*, London: Hutchinson, 198.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

that can arise from living in an Irish dominated area.²⁰ However, if some denied their origins, others began to reassert their Irish identity, based on identification with other Irish people in Britain rather than with those who had remained in Ireland.

The Irish Community Comes Out

Once a channel of communication and a forum of discussion were available through the *Irish Post* newspaper, a number of national organizations were formed. New branches of artistic expression were also represented in the London Irish community for the first time. Irish artists and writers formed various arts, drama and writer groups. In 1980 an Irish video project was started in order to document the experience of the Irish community in Britain. The “Sense of Ireland” festival was held in London in 1980.²¹

The hunger strikes in the early 1980s had a significant impact on the Irish community as consciousness of being Irish was heightened. As a consequence many more people began to become involved in Irish community affairs. Many Irish voluntary groups originated during this period and were instrumental in lobbying official bodies to give expression to the Irish as a community in Britain. The *Irish in Britain Representation Group* (IBRG) was set up in 1981 as there was no effective voice for representing the Irish in social and political matters and many of the Irish born founders felt that their Irishness was being sacrificed and was not being passed on to their children in a positive way. The same year a left-wing *Greater London Council* (GLC) with an overtly anti-racist agenda was elected and headed by Ken Livingstone who was to become a fervent advocate of the Irish in London. The GLC recognised the Irish as an ethnic minority thereby rendering legitimate the funding of specifically Irish welfare and cultural projects.

Changes continued into the 1990s and many of these were reflections of what was happening within Ireland. Mass emigration into England had considerably declined, the Peace Process was taking place in Northern Ireland, the Celtic Tiger economy was booming and consequently Irish people were becoming more confident in themselves and in their country. The popularity of *Riverdance*, the intermission piece of the 1994

²⁰ Liz Curtis et al. (1988), *Hearts and Minds: Anam agus Intinn – The Cultural Life of London’s Irish Community*, London: London Strategic Policy Unit, Recreation and Arts Group, 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Eurovision Song Contest, led to a surge in interest in Irish culture and showcased Ireland to an ever increasing global audience. Irish popular culture became very visible in the global market. In addition, younger Irish emigrants in England, far better educated than their predecessors, were confident and less inclined to suppress their own culture and to avoid drawing attention to themselves.²²

One of the culminating points of the progress the Irish had made towards cultural visibility was when the first official St Patrick's Day parade was planned for 2002 in London. The organizers stated at the time that:

The Irish in London have always played a key role in many facets of society. There could never be a better time to celebrate the rich tapestry of life in our multicultural capital and we would like to extend a warm invitation to all Londoner's to join the Irish community in celebrating this special day.²³

Such prominent visibility was seen as the formal acceptance of the contribution of the Irish to multicultural London which came a year after the inclusion of an Irish ethnic category in the 2001 Census.²⁴

The celebration of Irishness in England has clearly evolved in the post-war period but how have the Irish cultural centres in London experienced these changes and have they entered a period of dynamism and renewed interest in the activities they offer?

Irish Centres in London: a new dynamism?

Interviews were carried out in four London Irish centres in February 2006: the *London Irish Centre*, *Haringey Irish Centre*, *Hammersmith and Fulham Irish Centre* and the *South London Irish Centre*. This sample consists of two centres—the *London Irish Centre* and the *South London Irish Centre*—which opened in 1955 and 1966 respectively, during the earlier period of mass Irish emigration to England in the decades following the Second World War. In addition, the *Haringey Irish Centre* was opened in 1987 during the period of “new wave” Irish emigration to England in the 1980s and the cultural centre of the

²² Tim Pat Coogan (2000), *Wherever Green is Worn*, London: Hutchinson, 125.

²³ Nagle, John (2005), “Everybody’s Irish on St. Patrick’s Day: Ambivalence and Alterity at London’s St. Patrick’s Day 2002”, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, no. 12, 564.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Hammersmith and Fulham Irish Centre opened in 1997 at a time when Irish emigrants were returning to Ireland to take part in the Irish economic boom.

The *London Irish Centre* and the *Hammersmith and Fulham Irish Centre* (help and advice centre) were both opened by religious orders but the *South London Irish Centre* was set up by Irish people in the building trade as a place to meet and socialize after work. The *Haringey Irish Centre* was opened in the mid-1980s at a time when many other black and ethnic minority communities were establishing their own centres and were starting to celebrate their difference and identity in multicultural London.²⁵

The first thing that strikes the visitor when they arrive at the *South London Irish Centre* and *Haringey Irish Centre* is the relative dilapidation of these two places. This gives you the impression that they have passed their heyday. If you add *Hammersmith and Fulham Irish Centre* to the aforementioned centres, you are also struck by the general silence when you enter. The *London Irish Centre* is much plusher but it must be taken into consideration that this centre's rooms are often rented out for meetings and conferences which contribute to increasing its revenue. It is therefore in the centre's interest to keep the building in good condition.

The four centres offer the same type of activities such as Irish dancing lessons (both set and step dancing), *Ceilis*, traditional Irish music events with *Comhaltas*, Irish music classes, concerts by visiting bands and singers, Irish language classes and tea dances. When asked what the participation in these activities was like, all the respondents stated that the Irish language classes had the least success. *Ceilis* took place once a month and had small crowds whereas in the past they would take place once a week and could attract up to two hundred people. The Irish dancing lessons were particularly popular with second-generation Irish children and Irish dancing schools used the Irish centres to hold their lessons. The respondent in the *London Irish Centre* said that Japanese people particularly liked Irish set dancing!

Three of the centres, *Haringey Irish Centre*, *Hammersmith and Fulham Irish Centre* and the *London Irish Centre*, had noticed changes following the *Riverdance* phenomenon. One respondent said it had given a higher profile to step dancing, another that it had opened Irish dancing to a wider public and had broken the more traditional stereotype associated with this type of dancing.²⁶ One person said that classes were very popular with Eastern Europeans.²⁷

²⁵ Haringey Irish Centre Interview (2006).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Hammersmith and Fulham Irish Centre Interview (2006).

All the interviewees stated how difficult it was to get young adults both the Irish migrant and second-generation to attend the centres' activities and that they had a more ageing population in attendance, those emigrants of the 1940s and 1950s. This situation reflects the changing nature of Irish emigration to England with less young Irish emigrants arriving now than in the past.

The respondent in the *London Irish Centre* remarked that it was hard to attract younger people to the centre's events which were suffering from an out-dated image. He felt that *Riverdance* had helped revive Irish dancing but that generally the image of Irish cultural events was not changing very much and that many new ideas were needed. Regarding the most recent Irish emigrants, he was of the opinion that these younger professional people saw their lives in Ireland and considered their stay in London as only temporary, as a way of gaining professional experience so they were not particularly interested in taking part in the centre's events.

It now seems that if the Irish-born migrants are getting involved in Irish groups in England, it is more likely to be the London Branch of the *University College Dublin Alumni Association*, or professional bodies like the *Association of Irish Architects* in Britain. In addition, these people do not have the same need for the social and employment connections that were once so valued by earlier emigrants.²⁸

The interviewees were asked what their centre did for St Patrick's Day. The Irish Ambassador comes to the *London Irish Centre* every year, a mass is said there and a bacon and cabbage lunch is organized. In the evening, there is always a musical event. In the *South London Irish Centre*, there is music all day, food is served and Gaelic games are televised. In the *Hammersmith and Fulham Irish Centre*, a band comes to play and there's a pensioner's tea-dance. When asked if they were involved in the London St Patrick's day parade, the respondent at the *South London Irish Centre* said that a mini-bus took people to the parade and the *Haringey Irish Centre* had participated last year by preparing a float. One interviewee stated that there had always been St Patrick's Day parades in London but they had taken part at borough level, had never got media attention and had not been very successful. The official London parade was described as a "slick" event by the respondent at the *Haringey Irish Centre*. It is funded by Ken Livingstone, the mayor of London, and attracts some famous artists and musicians.

²⁸ Niall Cunningham, (2000), "Are the Pipes still Calling?" *The Irish Post*, 17 June, 14.

When asked if Irish cultural events have become more visible in the last ten to fifteen years, the interviewees in the *South London Irish Centre* and *Haringey Irish Centre* said “less visible”. The numbers coming to use their centres have decreased enormously and those that are the most loyal are the earlier immigrant generations. However, both these respondents noted that the official St Patrick’s Day parade had made *the Irish* more visible. However, another interviewee in *Hammersmith and Fulham Irish Centre*, who felt that the Irish were gaining cultural visibility, was concerned at the type of image that was being projected. He had mixed feelings about the imagery, he said: “there’s a lot of the traditional stuff, Guinness, paddywhackery stuff, a lot of it clichéd”.²⁹

Particular types of Irish cultural events are gaining more visibility on a public level within London society. While one could suppose that the Irish have at last gained official recognition of their cultural difference in London, it must be asked what image of Irish culture is being projected? The image of Irish culture that is being appropriated by multicultural London owes more to cultural stereotypes than to Celtic tradition and many of the older Irish immigrants do not relate to this reproduction of Irishness. However, at the same time, the younger Irish generation, both Irish-born and second-generation, do not seem to relate to the type of Irishness celebrated in the Irish centres and do not frequent them to any great extent.

The future of these centres remains uncertain, the younger Irish-born generation has reacted sharply against the Saints-and-Shamrock culture of its parents. According to Niall Cunningham, responding to the needs of young people a generation away from the culture of dinner dances and bacon and cabbage suppers will be a big challenge for these Irish centres in the future.³⁰ Irishness is no longer exclusive to Irish people. In addition, younger Irish people do not need to go to Irish centres as they can celebrate their Irishness in many social contexts nowadays. Irishness is global and inclusive and open to everyone to have access to. The popularity of Irish theme bars all over the world bears testimony to this. The meaning of Irishness is changing in Ireland and this is having repercussions on the Irish emigrant communities. In December 2005, the *Irish Post* published a job advertisement for a new editor and the job description read as follows:

²⁹ Hammersmith and Fulham Interview (2006).

³⁰ Cunningham, Niall (2000), “Are the Pipes still Calling?”, *The Irish Post*, 17 June, 14.

The climate is changing fast in Ireland. The economy is Europe's fastest growing; old traditions are being set aside; a new culture is taking shape. The same is true of the Irish in Britain: A new generation is forming that shares the same love of Ireland as their parents but have many different needs [...] We're looking for a talented journalist who understands the shift and has innovative ideas on how to handle "climate change".³¹

So, even the *Irish Post*, which has been in existence for more than thirty years now, has to face up to the challenge of adapting to the changes taking place if it is to continue playing a central role within the Irish community in Britain.

Conclusion

It is clear that the celebration of Irishness in London has evolved since 1945. The last ten years have brought about enormous changes in the way Irishness is viewed. Nowadays rather than being subject to mockery, "the Hibernian is hip", "being Green is the new Black".³²

According to Breda Gray a new form of Irishness, a more globalized form, has evolved in the last ten years and the British public has been receptive to a celebration of Irish activities—facilitated by a discourse of "multiculturalism" that values cultural diversity and by the increasing globalization of the Irish cultural industry epitomized in the 1990s by the show *Riverdance*.³³

The Irish have indeed gained cultural "visibility" in London but one has to wonder if the representation of Irish identities has been reduced to a clichéd and a commercialized form in order to fit a niche in multicultural Britain? How are the traditional Irish centres going to survive in the long term? How is the celebration of Irish culture going to evolve in the future in London? What shape is it going to take? How is the climate really going to change? These questions still remain to be answered.

³¹ Editor (2005), "The Irish Post – Climate Change", *Irish Post*, 31 December.

³² John Nagle, (2005), "Everybody's Irish on St. Patrick's Day: Ambivalence and Alterity at London's St. Patrick's Day 2002", *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, no. 12, 566.

³³ Breda Gray, (2000), "From 'Ethnicity' to 'Diaspora': 1980s Emigration and 'Multicultural' London", *The Irish Diaspora*, (ed.) Andy Bielenberg, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 74.

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