

EXPLORING IRISH MIGRATION TO LUTON IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD.

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Abstract.

This dissertation explores Irish migration to Luton in the post-war period. Drawing on newspaper articles, documentary and television interviews and sociological reports, as well as census data and oral history interviews, it examines how the Luton Irish population fit into the wider historical narrative of the Irish experience in Britain. It does this through exploring the economic opportunities they had, as well as the prejudice and discrimination they faced upon their arrival and settlement in Luton. This dissertation also focuses on the importance of Irish cultural organisations and their establishment in Luton, and how this benefited the Luton Irish community. Finally, this dissertation uses oral family history to contrast and compare the experiences of first, second and third generation migrants' lives in Luton, and how they view their Irish identity.

Introduction.

Irish migration to Britain increased significantly during the post-war period of the twentieth century, due to a range of economic, social and cultural factors. This dissertation analyses these factors that sparked migration, focusing particularly on the industrial town of Luton as a case study for Irish settlement in Britain overall. This growth in the Irish population of Luton created a need for Irish cultural organisations, which formed the basis for building and maintaining social and communal relationships for migrants upon their initial arrival. This dissertation focuses on the impact of these cultural organisations up to the present day, and the role they continue to play in the life of the Luton Irish. Through interviews of first, second and third generation migrants I have explored what Irish identity means to migrants who have settled in Luton, and how strong their connection to Ireland and their Irishness remains as they become more assimilated within British society.

The work of historians such as Enda Delaney and Clair Wills, and sociologists John Rex and Robert Moore, Mary J. Hickman and social geographer Bronwen Walter has assessed Irish migration to Britain in the post-war period. Delaney in his works, has focused on the complexity of placing the migrant Irish population within British society, rejecting the notion of their assumed assimilation and studying how the Irish experience differed based on the area migrants settled in, their social class and their gender. Delaney also focuses on how the Irish themselves felt displaced, categorising themselves as outsiders based on the prejudice they faced upon their arrival. Clair Wills, picks up on the transition that took place from the narrative of unity that was present in 1945, to the discrimination and stereotypes migrant

communities faced. Wills, in her focus on the Irish, identifies the stereotypes that were constructed, particularly the image of the male 'Paddy', and the Irish as 'drinkers' and how the Irish reacted to this, constructing their own communities despite adversity. Both sociologists Rex and Moore and Hickman, and social geographer Bronwen Walter, have studied Irish settlement communities in larger industrial cities, such as London, Birmingham and Greater Manchester. In these studies, sociologists and social geographer Walter have focused on the experience of Irish migrants, assessing their occupations, residential patterns and the extent to which they have merged with the native British population.

Whilst these studies focus primarily on migrant experiences in highly populated industrial cities and how they compare, they do not look more widely at smaller industrial towns in Britain, where a lot of Irish migrants also settled. This dissertation, however, focuses particularly on Irish migration to Luton, an industrial town located thirty miles north of London, during this time. In exploring migration to Luton specifically, I was able to analyse how migrants in one town fit into the wider historical framework of the Irish experience in larger cities in Britain, in order to assess to what extent Irish migrants experienced comparable job opportunities, residential restrictions and communal responses upon their settlement, and how their experience differed in comparison to an Irish migrant in a larger city such as London. Luton is also a relevant example due to its large Irish population, which is still significant in the town in the present day. During the 1970s, Luton was recorded as having the third highest Irish migrant population in England. Even as recently as the 2011 census, Luton was found to have the highest percentage of Irish residents

living outside of London, with 6,126 (3 percent), of Luton Residents ticking the 'Irish' box.¹

Within this research, I have analysed several types of primary sources. This includes local and national newspaper archives, documentaries and television news interviews, sociological reports and census data. Primary sources such as newspaper articles and media interviews give an insight into public attitudes to Irish migrants at the time of their initial settlement, thus supporting the historiography surrounding the Irish experience. Census data is valuable in exploring Luton specifically as it gives an insight into the amount of Irish migrants who settled in the town and how this increased in the post war period. Census data also allows for exploring the age range, gender and most popular occupations of Luton residents, in order to assess how similar these patterns were to that of the wider Irish population overall. Alongside this, I have implemented the use of oral history, conducting seven interviews with first generation Irish migrants in order to record their personal experiences of life in Luton, and how these experiences fit into the wider Irish experience in Britain. I have also conducted three interviews with second and third generation migrants in an attempt to compare how personal perspectives on Irish identity differ as each generation moves further away from the migrant experience, and to what extent each individual's sense of 'Irishness' remains.

Due to the interviews conducted, the ethics associated with carrying out oral history had to be considered as part of my research. Primarily, when retelling someone's words or experiences, there must be care taken to not misrepresent what is being

¹ Luton Irish Forum Website, <http://lutonirishforum.org/luton/> (date accessed- 24/04/19).

told, be that through asking leading questions in order to direct someone's answer, or taking words out of context. Within oral history, there has to be a "dynamic interplay between justice and care, rights and responsibilities", when relaying the experiences of someone else.² There also must be care taken not to rely solely on the interviewee's perspective, as oral history is dependent on several unreliable factors, including "the reliability of memory, the psychology of the interview relationship...and the re-representation of people's lives".³

The dynamics of family oral history must also be considered, given that this is the basis of the final chapter. Family history has been referred to as "a high risk endeavour", as it requires removal of the emotional connection towards interviewees or their experiences, in order to gain an honest account.⁴ Due to my interviews being utilised in relation to the wider historiography of Irish migration, it is important to consider that in "making connections between the narrative and larger cultural formations" there is a risk. There is potential that the original interviewee's meanings or intentions behind what they say can be misinterpreted or misconstrued, and so "this is where the issues of our responsibility to our living source become most acute", and where we must be careful that we do not display a false narrative.⁵ The works of Alison Light and Carolyn Steedman have used oral family history in order to explore how their own families fit into the wider historical landscape. In my final chapter, I follow the approach of these historians by exploring

² Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, (Maryland, 2015), p.160.

³ (eds.) Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, (New York, 2006), p.x.

⁴ Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History*, p.285.

⁵ Katherine Borland, 'That's not what I said': interpretive conflict in oral narrative research' in S. Berger Gluck and D. Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, (New York, 1991), p.321.

what my own family's experience in Luton tells us about the Irish experience more generally.

The first chapter looks at the reasons for increased Irish migration to Britain in the post-war period, exploring several push and pull factors which drove this pattern of migration. The chapter also assesses how the migrant experience differed for men and women, with men for the most part driven by the prospect of increased economic opportunity, whilst for women it was the idea of a society in which they had freedom to work outside of the domestic sphere, something which was not socially acceptable in Ireland at the time. Chapter one also disputes the widely accepted historical narrative that Irish migrants seamlessly assimilated into British society, by exploring the prejudice and discrimination that the Irish faced upon their arrival to Britain. For the Irish it was their accent and thus, their audibility which was utilised by the native British population to discriminate against them.

The second chapter explores the importance of Irish cultural organisations in Luton. The chapter looks at how the need for these cultural organisations came as the Luton Irish community increased, due to job opportunities available for migrants in the town. The importance of the Catholic Church and its role in the lives of the Luton Irish community is also explored within this chapter, as the church was instrumental in the lives of many migrants, providing a space of familiarity and comfort but also an opportunity for the Irish to meet and socialise with one another in order to form relationships. I have analysed two cultural organisations in Luton, the Celtic Supporters Club and the Luton Irish Forum, and the ways in which their

establishment has aided the Luton Irish community in their social life, but also in regards to the welfare support that the organisations provide.

The third and final chapter is based around oral history. The chapter compares three members and three generations of my family, and is based on interviews of first, second and third generation Irish migrants. This chapter aims to explore how each generation views their own Irish identity and individual 'Irishness'. In comparing three generations, the chapter assesses how each individual's personal identification in relation to their Irish heritage changes over time. The chapter also explores the introduction of the phrase 'plastic paddy' in the 1980s in relation to second and third generation migrants' claims to their Irish heritage. In doing so, the chapter aims to compare to what extent migrants, whether first, second or third generation, are truly assimilated into British society.

Chapter One – Post-war Irish migration to Britain.

In the post-war period, the stream of Irish migration to Britain steadily increased, with several 'push' and 'pull' factors characterising individual decisions to cross the Irish Sea. Changing economic and social circumstances both in Ireland and Britain meant that migration was a logical decision for many who sought to improve their circumstances. The experience of migrants once they arrived from Ireland is a topic which has been underexplored, with the assumption that due to their lack of visible differences, Irish migrants assimilated with ease into British society. The reality however, is that Irish migrants were subjected to levels of prejudice and discrimination which acted as barriers to assimilation. Indeed, the influx of West Indian migrants in the mid-1950s were subjected to abuse and referred to as "the black Irish".⁶ This illustrates the underlying fear of "the foreigner" that the British had, highlighting that in spite of their lessened visibility, a comparison can still be drawn between the Irish migrant and other colonial migrant groups of the time period.

Several push factors were responsible for the increased flow of Irish migration to Britain, with a declining economy in Ireland itself one of the most prominent. Advances in technology meant "tractors, milking machines and other labour saving devices" were put in place across farms, particularly in the West of Ireland, in the post-war period, thus decreasing demand for agricultural labour.⁷ These developments, combined with a shortage of employment available in other sectors,

⁶ Enda Delaney, *the Irish in post-war Britain*, (New York, 2007), p.116.

⁷Enda Delaney, *Irish Emigration since 1921, Studies in Irish Economic and Social History*, (Ireland, 2002), p.22.

meant emigration was ultimately based on the young Irish having “a lack of opportunity in their own country”.⁸ This was evidenced by the fact that “a third of the agricultural labour force in independent Ireland in 1951, roughly halved by 1971”.⁹

From this perspective, the decision for male Irishmen to migrate appears to be purely economical, with men in this period traditionally making up the labour force in Ireland. However, changing social circumstances also played a factor. In migrating, men were able to escape the rigid social hierarchy of Ireland, whereby family occupations were often passed down to the eldest son. This transfer of responsibility became less appealing to young Irish males as societal values changed, placing greater emphasis on aspiring to higher standards of living. Not only this, but “by the post-war period, agriculture as a livelihood was far less attractive to those in search of economic security”.¹⁰ This desire for a better life alongside the rejection of traditional familial processes meant that migration from Ireland “provided an opportunity to circumvent the position ascribed to them solely by virtue of their father’s occupation”.¹¹

Evidence of improved circumstances for Irish male migrants was publicised within British media. A newspaper article from *The Birmingham Gazette* in 1951 published the experience of a male Irish migrant, 36 year old John Blanchfield from Dublin, who came to Birmingham in search of work. He managed to get a job in the Dunlop tyre factory on the day he arrived. When comparing his situation in Dublin with

⁸ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, “Old Ireland”, Thursday 4th September 1952, p.6.

⁹ Delaney, *Irish Emigration*, p.22.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.25.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.27.

England, he stated “I was doing casual labouring...but even that ran out. I just couldn’t get a job of any sort. Try keeping a family of eight on fifty bob. That’s the maximum amount Dublin’s social welfare department can pay”. Now in England, Blanchfield claimed to be “averaging £10 a week, and I never earned so much in my life”.¹² These sentiments were repeated in an article featuring another Irish male migrant in the *Daily Herald*, published over ten years later. Plasterer Joe Laftan stated “I made £10 a week in Ireland...now I make 25 quid a week on a big office block in London...I pay about £3, 10s. for my digs in Cricklewood. I still send £4 home, and I’m a member of six strip clubs in the West End”.¹³ The publication of such experiences gave those who remained in Ireland a perspective on the potential rewards associated with migration, and helped facilitate the continuous flow of migrants into Britain, searching for economic prosperity and social freedoms.

For women in Ireland, the desire to migrate was also due to more than job prospects. Irish society traditionally located the woman within the household, actively discouraging work outside of the domestic sphere. The 1937 Constitution saw the Irish government outline these beliefs, as it “firmly stressed the role of women as the nation’s homemakers and child-bearers”.¹⁴ This was legitimised through a series of government strategies, including barring married women from working in the civil service, and limited job roles made available to women. Not only this, women who did work were viewed as having a significantly lower social status, with domestic servants, “viewed as an inferior form of life by both employers and

¹² *The Birmingham Gazette*, Tuesday 4th September 1951, p.4.

¹³ *Daily Herald*, ‘Why 1,000 Irish leave home every week’, Monday 4th December 1961, p.6.

¹⁴ Michael O hAodha and John O’Callaghan (eds.), *Narratives of the Occluded Irish Diaspora*, (Switzerland, 2012), p.57.

the community at large”.¹⁵ These economic and social obstacles, when contrasted with the opportunities in Britain, created an increased flow of young women leaving Ireland for a life with more income and less restrictions within society.

Unlike other migrant groups, in which initial migration was generally male dominated, such as West Indian migrants arriving in Britain during the late 1940s and early 1950s, this was not the case amongst the Irish. As evidenced by Enda Delaney, from the period 1926-1971, there were 973 females immigrating to Britain per 1,000 males, meaning there was not a lot of gender disparity amongst Irish migrants.¹⁶ Not only this, but another characteristic of Irish migration which is emphasised was the youth of those who left, as “between 1943 and 1951...over 70 percent of females were under the age of 25 years; for males almost one half were below the age of 25 years and two-thirds were less than 30 years”.¹⁷ The youth of Irish migrants in this period was re-iterated by an article published in *The Times* in 1954. In discussing the range of Irish migrants to Britain, the article states that of men who migrated “in 1951...seven out of 10 were under 30; of the women, 86 percent were under 30...four out of 10 were between 16 and 19 years”.¹⁸ The young age of those travelling to Britain highlights the desire for improved standards of living in a society which offered new opportunities. Increased economic opportunity as a driving factor can also be highlighted by the fact that again, unlike in the case of West Indian migration, Irish migration also “affected the level of

¹⁵ Enda Delaney, *Demography, State and Society: Irish migration to Britain, 1921-1971*, (Liverpool, 2000), pp.184-185.

¹⁶ Delaney, *Irish Emigration*, p.11.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.12.

¹⁸ *The Times*, ‘Irish Hands across the Sea’, Monday 2nd August 1954, p.7.

family movement...in the 1950s, the departure of complete families became more common".¹⁹

The main areas of settlement for these Irish migrants were large industrial cities, such as London, Birmingham and Coventry, which were so called 'boom towns' by the 1950s, and had a high demand for labour. In Birmingham for example, the post-war boom in occupations such as "construction, light engineering...and textiles" meant that by the 1960s, more than "5 percent of the city's population were born in Ireland, three times the national average".²⁰ The Irish also took jobs which were rejected by English workers in favour of shorter working hours and better wages in other sectors, such as working on public transportation. Evidence of the vital role that the Irish played in Birmingham's transportation system can be seen in an article published in 1952, which stated that "one third of a vital sector of Birmingham's economy- the city transport- is manned by Irish women. The recent statement...that without Irish labour the city's transport system would collapse is no exaggeration".²¹

Outside of industrial cities, a large proportion of the Irish settled in "medium sized English towns with expanding industries" including areas such as Luton.²² From the period of 1951 to 1961, the Irish population of the town grew from less than 2,000 to 7,000.²³ This was due to increased economic opportunity through businesses such as Vauxhall motor cars, which "expanded in the 1950s and this created plenty

¹⁹ Delaney, *Irish Emigration*, pp.12-13.

²⁰ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.97.

²¹ *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, Friday 5th September 1952, p.5.

²² Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.105.

²³ Bronwen Walter, *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place and Irish Women*, (London, 2001), p.93.

of opportunities for employment”.²⁴ This economic attraction to Luton meant an Irish community had begun to form, which in turn attracted other migrants to the town, resulting in a growing Irish network. A letter written into the *Irish Independent* from a migrant returning to Ireland from Luton in the 1980s, stated that “in Luton there is a high degree of welcome from established Irish people for new arrivals, e.g. introduction to jobs, accommodation...and parish centres to name but a few”.²⁵ This demonstrates the extent to which pre-existing Irish migrant groups within the area facilitated the ease of transition for new arrivals.

Brendan Marcantonio, who travelled to Luton from Dublin in 1958, aged 17, stated that “there was loads of work, that’s why people came over here. At Vauxhall, they were dragging them in from the streets, if you had some kind of experience”.²⁶ He went on to work in several industrial factory jobs, including Vauxhall car factories in both Luton and nearby town Dunstable and worked as a storeman at Luton Airport until he retired at the age of 66. Brendan’s career history is reflective of the general trend of male Irish migrants, who tended to dominate in occupations of construction or heavy industry which were prevalent features of post-war Britain. Delaney emphasises that “by the mid-twentieth century it was power stations, motorways and airports...that were the main source of employment...by 1957...over 150,000 Irish men were employed in such work”.²⁷

Catherine Martin, who travelled from County Cork to England in 1967, aged 19, moved first to Scunthorpe and then down to Luton. She also reflected on how easy

²⁴ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.105.

²⁵ Article from the *Irish Independent*, Tuesday 6th December 1988, p.10.

²⁶ Interview with Brendan Marcantonio, aged 77, on 3rd January 2019.

²⁷ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.113.

it was for her to find work in England. She stated that “when I came down to Luton, I got a job straightaway, there was so many jobs around you could go from one to another. You could leave a job this week and you could jump into another one the next week. It was absolutely brilliant”.²⁸ She had an ambition to be a nurse, an occupation which was heavily filled by female Irish migrants in Britain’s post-war years. Bronwen Walter assessed the general trend in occupations of Irish female migrants and found that by 1951, Irish women from the Republic were clustered in two areas – the professions (22 percent) and personal services (40 percent).²⁹ Of the professional occupations, nursing and midwifery were the prevailing areas in which Irish women worked, making up 11.4 percent of the total number.³⁰ Indeed, by the 1960s the Irish nurse had become “such a characteristic feature of the London hospital service” that they were “not thought of as immigrant labour”.³¹

The role of Irish female migrants within nursing was emphasised not only by the sheer amount of women occupying these roles, but also by the media. An article from the *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, stated that “half the hospitals in Birmingham would have been closed if local girls had been relied on to staff them...girls from Ireland...now form a large proportion of hospital staff”.³² This highlights the vital role that female Irish migrants played in fulfilling the labour void in the post-war period. Indeed, in a television news interview in which residents in Birmingham

²⁸ Interview with Catherine Martin, aged 71, on 4th February 2019.

²⁹ Walter, *Outsiders Inside*, p.150.

³⁰ John Archer Jackson, *the Irish in Britain*, (London, 1963), p.106.

³¹ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.91.

³² *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, “Irish nurses keep hospitals open”, 30th November 1953, p.5.

were asked for their opinion on the Irish, one man stated “I’m convinced that without the Irish...Birmingham would come to a complete standstill wouldn’t it”.³³

Aside from economic and social circumstances, a factor which pushed the Irish to migrate to Britain was the familiarity of England itself, with a common language and ever growing Irish population. Knowing that these Irish communities existed somewhat “lessened the inherent risks involved in such a move” for migrants.³⁴

Migrant networks were significant as they assisted Irish migrants with their transition into these new areas of settlement. This included providing emotional support, as well as educating on urban life, including aspects of “work practices, outlets to socialise, and the peculiarities of living with and working alongside the English”.³⁵ The importance of this to the Irish was highlighted in a sociological report carried out in Sparkbrook, Birmingham, in the 1960s, in which it was found that “kinship was important for the Irish, particularly in the early stages of migration when contacts who could help with accommodation or employment were necessary”.³⁶ Of ninety nine Irish men and women surveyed as part of Rex and Moore’s research, 22 stated their primary reason for migration was to join relatives (including migration to marry) or friends who had already settled in Britain, making it one of the highest motivating factors, second only to seeking better economic opportunities.³⁷

³³ Midland Montage Television Interview, *Irish Immigrants*, 22nd March 1962.

³⁴ Delaney, *Irish Emigration*, p.30.

³⁵ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.29.

³⁶ John Rex and Robert Moore, *Race, Community and Conflict: A Study of Sparkbrook*, (London, 1967), p.86.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.90.

Despite the existence of these migrant networks which aimed to ease the transition for the Irish arriving in Britain, the discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes that the Irish faced could not be avoided. This discrimination in the post-war period was not a new social rhetoric, as the Irish had been stereotyped as racially inferior long beforehand. This belief was re-enforced through the racial science of the nineteenth century, in which the Irish were included “as a related low branch on the ‘Tree of Man’”. As part of this science, “explicit links...were made to establish equivalences between black African and Irish physical characteristics” and so the ‘white negro’ status of the Irish was reinforced.³⁸

Stereotyping of the Irish through their bodies was a theme that continued into the twentieth century, with the stereotypes that were voiced during the post-war period reminiscent of these views. For men, the most commonly recognised image was the image of the ‘Paddy’, a “male, working class stereotype...whose manual labour characterises them by their bodies”.³⁹ Not only this, but the association of Irish men with these jobs in construction and heavy industry which in turn meant rough, often outdoor, working conditions, caused them to be associated with dirt, and so the stereotype of the ‘Dirty Irish’ came to be. As part of a documentary following the experiences of the Irish in Britain, released in 1965, one Irish man recalled his experience of encountering these stereotypes, stating “I’ve heard Englishmen and Englishwomen say it, my god are they not savage? When they used

³⁸ Walter, p.83.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.88.

to see the lads with their vest off...but them lads couldn't help it, they were working hard".⁴⁰

The portrayal of Irish men as rough and uncivilised meant they were categorised as being "naturally prone to physical violence. Often...associated with heavy drinking".⁴¹ This was a common belief amongst the 'native' British population when discussing the Irish. Research which took place in 1960s Sparkbrook recorded the Irish being described as "the main problem among newcomers...they 'got boozed up to the eyeballs', became fighting mad, and punched and kicked one another in the street".⁴² In a news interview conducted in Sparkbrook in 1963, a woman expressed her contempt for the behaviour of her Irish neighbours, stating that "property is being demolished and destroyed...every time we make an attempt to improve it they just bully you".⁴³ This highlights that these stereotypes had a real impact on people's view of the Irish in British society, with people making sweeping judgements as a result of individual behaviours. A police officer who was asked for his opinion on the Irish stated "they're alright if they don't have too much beer" again illustrating the link made between the Irish consuming alcohol and participating in anti-social behaviour.⁴⁴

Clair Wills discusses the fact that these stereotypes of the Irish as violent alcoholics were viewed by the English as a 'racial characteristic'. In actual fact, these behaviours were a result of the lifestyle they were exposed to in Britain, where the

⁴⁰ Quote from *The Irishmen: An Impression of Exile*, 1965.

⁴¹ Walter, p.89.

⁴² Rex and Moore, *Race, Community and Conflict*, p.70.

⁴³ Midland Montage Interview, *Travellers in Sparkbrook*, 23rd July 1963.

⁴⁴ Interview, *Irish Immigrants*, 22nd March 1962.

average Irish labourer was “without household, without authority, without having to answer to their family, to the state, to anyone at all”.⁴⁵ These newfound freedoms, alongside the fact that within construction Irish men were exposed to “brutalising conditions” whereby they drove “the men hard...often refusing to provide cover in wet weather, wellington boots, or even sufficient timber to create safe working conditions”⁴⁶, meant that Irish men became hardened from their exploitation and “the pub became their refuge”⁴⁷ from their poor working and living conditions.

These stereotypes of violence and drunken disorder were thus linked with the idea of the Irish as feckless, no-good criminals, which was further re-enforced through the perpetuation of Irish migrants by those in positions of authority, as was reported in the media. In 1955, the *Birmingham Daily Post* published an article including a comment by lawyer R.C. Vaughan that read “natives of Ireland regard Birmingham as a happy hunting ground making a short stay, raiding such houses and premises as they can find, then making their way back to Ireland with their ill-gotten gains”.⁴⁸ Similarly, a judge had also made a comment to a youth he was prosecuting on drinking charges that in living in the city’s Salvation Army hostel, he was “mixing with Irish drunks...and every conceivable type of ne’er do-well”.⁴⁹ As part of a news interview in 1963, a local vicar in Sparkbrook, Birmingham also voiced his concerns regarding the threat that the Irish posed to the local community, stating that “we had a new influx of these immigrants from Ireland and

⁴⁵ Clair Wills, *Lovers and Strangers: An Immigrant History of Post-War Britain*, (London, 2018), p.135.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp.137-138.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.140.

⁴⁸ *The Birmingham Daily Post*, Saturday 5th February 1955, p.4.

⁴⁹ *The Birmingham Daily Post*, Friday 4th February 1955, p.5.

the place is back into chaos”.⁵⁰ These sentiments, expressed not only by those in positions of power, but also local community leaders, only served to re-enforce these commonly held prejudices as being considered factual.

As discussed by Bronwen Walter, Irish women were largely excluded from the discourse of the experience of the Irish migrant to Britain, with the main focus placed on the male ‘Paddy’ figure. The limited focus that was placed on women however, was also largely in relation to their bodies, which were used as a tool to stereotype them. The traditional association of the Irish having large families meant that Irish women were stereotyped through by their “excessive fertility”, which was thought of as being threatening to the English way of life, at the risk that it would cause “‘swamping’ and racial degeneration...unfair demand for resources and lack of control over...unruly, dirty and over-numerous children”.⁵¹ Their faith in the Roman Catholic Church was also blamed due to its ban on birth control, with Dr. Michael Watts, a lecturer at Nottingham University, stating in 1966 that “if the Catholic Church doesn’t change, we can’t afford to let the Irish in uncontrolled” for the fear it would result in “a population explosion” in Britain.⁵²

There was a concern that the Irish, with their larger than average families, would also become a drain on Britain’s recently established National Health Service and the Welfare State. This is evident in an article published by *The Times* in 1961, which classified a majority of Irish migrants as those who would be dependent on welfare upon their arrival, with most of them being categorised as “deserted mothers and

⁵⁰ Midland Montage Interview, *Travellers in Sparkbrook*, 23rd July 1963.

⁵¹ Walter, p.91.

⁵² *Daily Mirror*, Monday 5th December 1966, p.5.

young children who cannot take work even if it can be found for them, and young girls just out of school” who “arrive mostly on the Saturday night and have nowhere to go...they ask to be fed and housed...and then drift off to the Midlands or London”.⁵³ This belief that Irish migrants were essentially ‘scroungers’ who had a lot of children and relied on the state to support them, was further re-enforced by an article in the *Birmingham Daily Post* in 1962, in which it was stated that the Children’s Committee had urged Worcester City Council to house an Irish couple and their nine children even though they didn’t qualify, in order to avoid costing “the authority £3,000 a year” to provide for and house all the couple’s offspring , an effort which had so far already cost them over £1,000. ⁵⁴

This discrimination of the Irish is a factor of their migration in the post-war period which has often been overlooked, primarily due to the assumption that in being white and so less visible as the ‘other’ in the social landscape, they assimilated into British society with ease. The arrival of other and more visible migrant groups during the same time period, such as West Indian and Asian migrants, supposedly “served to distract attention away from Britain’s Irish population and allowed the Irish to move up the hierarchy of newcomers in British society”.⁵⁵ This is somewhat of a false narrative that has been constructed, with the consequence being that “the Irish have become invisible in the discourse of race in Britain, despite ongoing evidence of undisguised anti-Irish hostility”.⁵⁶

⁵³ *The Times*, 13th November 1961, p.6.

⁵⁴ *Birmingham Daily Post*, Saturday 29th December 1962, p.11.

⁵⁵ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.125.

⁵⁶ Walter, p.80.

Walter argues that whilst the main issue for migrant groups was their visibility, which made them easy to identify as being the 'other' or the 'outsider', for the Irish it was the issue of audibility. This made them easier to identify and thus exclude, from the general 'whiteness' of the British population. This similarity between 'visibility' for the black and Asian migrant population and the 'audibility' of the Irish was demonstrated in a comment made to anthropologist Mary Kells, in which it was stated "the thing about being Irish in England...is that they don't realise you're black until you open your mouth".⁵⁷ This overlap between the experiences of black and Irish migrants in Britain was also underpinned by the existence of signs which stated "No Blacks, No Irish" which were prevalent in the 1950s, highlighting that Irish migrants 'whiteness' was not necessarily advantageous in their transition into British society, as they were still considered 'the other'. In a letter written into the *Daily Herald* by an Irish migrant living in Staffordshire, he stated "my accent, until I reformed it...charmed the girls, but branded me to men as a feckless dreamer who could not be trusted with their money- or their daughters".⁵⁸ This association of the Irish 'audibility' as opposed to 'visibility' was the trait which identified them as the 'foreigner' within their new environments, allowing them to be alienated by the British population.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p.163.

⁵⁸ *Daily Herald*, Friday 28th November 1958, p.4.

Chapter Two – The importance of Irish cultural organisations in Luton.

For the Irish migrating to Britain in the post-war period, creating their own cultural organisations was essential. As Delaney states, the Irish migrant sought to “recreate the familiar whilst in the midst of change to counter the dislocation of emigration”.⁵⁹ Not only this, but the supposedly invisible nature of the Irish and the assumption that they assimilated into British society due to their lack of visible differences, can be dispelled through the analysis of cultural organisations and the significance they held for the Irish in Britain. Whilst “traditional historical accounts invariably perceive migrants as passive actors”, the reality is that in setting up and maintaining cultural organisations upon their arrival in Britain, migrants out rightly defied this historical narrative.⁶⁰ Cultural organisations not only incorporated traditional Irish music, entertainment and sports but also focused on the importance of the Catholic Church for the Irish in Britain, a factor which was a “central institution” within Irish migration.⁶¹ In Luton the Irish settlement community, which by 1971 had reached 9340 people, comprised 5.8% of the population of the town and was one of the largest Irish born populations in Britain, second only to Stretford and Coventry.⁶² The Irish in Luton claimed public spaces as their own, with several pubs identifiable as characteristically ‘Irish pubs’, and becoming symbolic of “the one place where they could find the warm, relaxed

⁵⁹ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.127.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.127.

⁶¹ Jackson, *Irish in Britain*, p.135.

⁶² Bronwen Walter, ‘Tradition and ethnic interaction: second wave Irish settlement in Luton and Bolton’, in C. Clarke, C. Peach and D. Ley (eds.), *Geography and Ethnic Pluralism*, (London, 1984), p.263.

atmosphere that becomes a substitute for home”.⁶³ The Irish also set up cultural organisations which aimed to fulfil the social and welfare needs of the Luton Irish population.

The Irish population of Luton increased significantly in the post-war period. In Bedfordshire as a whole, the population from the Irish Republic increased from 929 in 1931 to 3,911 by 1951.⁶⁴ This meant that in 1951, the number of Irish born people in the county was 13 per 1,000, compared to the average of 11 per 1,000 in England and Wales as a whole. By 1961, the total population of Luton was 130,000 with the Irish population totalling 7036 people, meaning they made up over 5% of the population of the town.⁶⁵ The reason for this increase was chiefly due to the employment opportunities that the town provided in the post-war period. The Vauxhall motor car plant first opened in Luton in 1905 when the company’s success meant they needed to expand their workforce. This company in particular, was responsible for the employment of 22,000 people in Luton and Dunstable by the 1960s.⁶⁶

The labour demand in this period was due to the post-war economic boom, termed as ‘the Golden Age of Capitalism’, which “brought a new level of prosperity and security to an increasingly large sector of the urban and industrial class” and meant that people had an increased income to put back into the economy in the form of

⁶³ Liam Ryan, ‘Irish Emigration to Britain Since World War II’ in R. Kearney, (eds.), *Migrations, the Irish at Home and Abroad*, (Dublin, 1990), p.56.

⁶⁴ Table M in County Report for Bedfordshire, *Census of England and Wales 1951*, Luton Central Library on 18/03/19.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, Table 4, accessed 18/03/19.

⁶⁶ *The Guardian*, “Vauxhall Motors: A History”, Thursday 10th September 2009.

purchasing consumer goods.⁶⁷ The amount of employment opportunities available in companies such as Vauxhall is reflected in job advertisements that were advertised in the local Luton newspaper, stating that there were “over 1,000 jobs vacant” in 1954, with an article stating that Vauxhall had provided jobs for “414 men and 116 women during the past month”.⁶⁸ These advertisements continued throughout the 1950s on a national level, with newspapers in Coventry and Birmingham publishing adverts of employment opportunities within Vauxhall Motors in February and March of 1957, stating that there were various positions available due to “a vast expansion programme and new model introductions” including “production machinists...body metal finishers...press operators, welders (all types).”⁶⁹ Another advert highlighted the benefits associated with working for the company, including “well established employee relation programmes, pension’s scheme, and recreation and canteen facilities”.⁷⁰ Just one year later, a Birmingham newspaper published that Vauxhall had offered a wage increase to employees of all skill levels, from “1 and a half d. an hour to labourers” to “an increase of 2 and a half d. an hour to skilled workers”, once more presenting Vauxhall as a desirable employer which offered significant advantages to its employees, thus increasing the appeal to travel to Luton in order to work there.⁷¹

⁶⁷ John Rule, ‘Time, affluence and private leisure: the working class in the 1950s and 1960s’ *Labour History Review*, Vol.66, No.2, (2001), p.227.

⁶⁸ *Luton News and Bedfordshire Chronicle*, “Over 1,000 Jobs Vacant”, Thursday 18th February 1954, p.3.

⁶⁹ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, Monday 18th February 1957, p.9.

⁷⁰ *The Birmingham Post and Gazette*, “Makers of Bedford trucks and Vauxhall Cars require Experienced Draughtsmen”, Wednesday 6th March 1957, p.12.

⁷¹ *The Birmingham Daily Post*, “Answer to Vauxhall Pay Offer Tomorrow”, Monday 8th September 1958, p.3.

One of the primary concerns which was present within Ireland was that migration to England would result in the corruption of the Irish population, freed from the restrictions of a highly religious society. These fears were so prevalent that in 1953, the *Handbook for Irish Men and Women Going to England* was published and highlighted messages of “obsession with sin, the danger of drink, the unique role of women as guardians of their own and everyone else’s purity” that the Irish were accustomed to hearing.⁷² In reality, Irish migrants travelling to England did not lose their Catholic faith, but instead maintained it. Religious faith for Irish migrants “offered a route to the understanding of one’s place in the world...it was a source of dignity and strength”, with the Church acting as a mediator “between the migrant and wider society”.⁷³ The Church itself offered the Irish population not only a sense of comfort as regular attendance reminded them of life in Ireland, but also acted as an initial point of contact with other migrants in the same position, thus paving the way for social interaction within their own communities.

The focus on the importance of the Catholic Church was evident in Luton, as the town had only two Catholic churches before the Second World War, but due to significant growth in the number of Irish Catholics needed eight more churches by the late 1970s.⁷⁴ There was also a particular emphasis on “retaining children with the fold of the church”, which not only meant attending mass services and participating in religious activities, but also sending children to Catholic schools.⁷⁵

This was part of an effort to ensure “the preservation of faith and morals of the

⁷² Wills, *Lovers and Strangers*, p.124.

⁷³ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.128.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p.156.

⁷⁵ Bronwen Walter, ‘Ethnicity and Irish residential distribution’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol.11, No.2, (1986), p.143.

children, and the education of parents into a sense of responsibility”.⁷⁶ The demand for this tradition to be upheld in Luton was highlighted when the local newspaper published an article in the early 1950s, where fears were expressed by Roman Catholic parents in Luton that local authorities would pay “lip service to the principle of religious freedom” but in reality force Roman Catholic children into “undenominational county schools” in an effort to save money.⁷⁷ The demands of these parents were so great that they had managed to collect over 10,000 names as part of their petition for a Roman Catholic school to be built in Luton.⁷⁸ This same fear was expressed in a further article published in 1953, in which it was stated that “in building another county school the local authority is forcing Roman Catholic children into such a school against the wishes of their parents”.⁷⁹ The article also stated that in there being no Catholic school in Luton at all, the local council were violating the Education Act 1944, section 76, which dictates that pupils should be educated “in accordance with the wishes of their parents”.⁸⁰

Emphasis on the importance of Catholic schools for the Irish population of Luton is also evidenced by social geographer Bronwen Walter’s work, as she found that there was significant residential clustering in areas of Luton where Catholic schools were present. Walter highlighted that a quarter of Luton Irish residents lived in the north-west suburb of Limbury in Luton, which was in close proximity to St. Joseph’s Catholic School. The area maintained density of the Irish born population between

⁷⁶ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.157.

⁷⁷ *Luton News and Bedfordshire Chronicle*, “No Shred of Evidence”, Thursday 8th June 1950, p.5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.5.

⁷⁹ *Luton News and Bedfordshire Chronicle*, “Luton R.C’s Renew School Claim”, Thursday 19th February 1953, p.10.

⁸⁰ Education Act 1944, Section 76.

1961 and 1982, recording 7.2% density in the former year, and 7.7% in the latter.⁸¹

This made the North West area of Luton close to St. Joseph's the second most popular area of settlement for the Irish population of Luton, behind the town centre, where 46% of Irish migrants resided in 1961.⁸² Walter also found that "a number of families who had first established themselves in other suburban areas, moved...when the children reached school age", highlighting the impact that religion had on the Luton Irish community, not only socially but also in terms of residential behaviour.⁸³ The emphasis placed upon religion in the lives of the children of Irish migrants was evident in interviews carried out. Mary Keegan, originally from County Galway, had two children once she migrated to Luton. She was keen to make religion a key part of their life as second-generation migrants. She stated "I tried to raise them like we were brought up, you know, mass and prayer and all that was the main thing in our family. They went to Catholic schools."⁸⁴ Margaret Browne, originally from County Leitrim, also stated that her children's upbringing was "traditionally Irish", and placed particular importance on "going to mass and keeping up with the religion part" during their upbringing, just as her parents had when she was growing up.⁸⁵

However, the Irish in Britain did not just use religious faith as a tool to adapt to their new life. Alongside church attendance and religious schooling, the establishment of cultural organisations which arranged social events specifically for the Irish, also helped the transition into an 'English' way of life, whilst allowing them to maintain a

⁸¹ Walter, 'Ethnicity and Irish residential distribution', p.135.

⁸² *Ibid*, p.135.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p.141.

⁸⁴ Interview with Mary Keegan, 4th February 2019.

⁸⁵ Interview with Margaret Browne, 4th February 2019.

connection to home and promoting interaction with other Irish migrants.

Dancehalls were a particular feature which catered for the migrant Irish, providing them with an environment “in which they could socialise and mix, without fear of offending the native population, or perhaps act more freely precisely because the English were not there”.⁸⁶ In spite of dances being set up specifically for the Irish population, in Luton these events faced some opposition. In a story published by the *Birmingham Daily Post* in 1961, it was reported that “three people living near St. Joseph’s Roman Catholic Church complained a Luton court yesterday...Sunday night dances held in the church hall were so noisy they contravened the Noise Abatement Act”.⁸⁷ The complaint included claims that “a dance band started up and went on until 11:30 p.m....around midnight car and motor-cycle engines are revved up, there is shouting and noise which doesn’t end until 12:30.”⁸⁸ Canon Arthur Brewer, who the complaints were brought against, stated the dances were part of his “duty to these young people. If we turn them away it may lead to worse trouble elsewhere”.⁸⁹ The opposition to these dances provides evidence that the assimilation of the Irish into Britain was not as easy as historiography suggests, with the native British population not readily accepting of these cultural events specifically provided for the Irish. The tension between the Irish and the wider Luton community emphasised the need for specifically Irish organisations even more so, as they provided a space in which there would be no hostility.

⁸⁶ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.170.

⁸⁷ *The Birmingham Daily Post*, “Nuisance Complaint against Church”, Saturday 4th November 1961, p.27.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p.27.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.27.

Given the relative youth of the Irish migrant population in the post-war period, dancehalls were also considered as locations to potentially find a partner, offering “an opportunity for men and women to meet each other...a considerable number...did first encounter their future partners on the English dance floors”.⁹⁰ As pointed out by Wills, unlike in the case of other migrants groups such as West Indians, the idea of sex between the Irish migrant and the native population was not considered to be an issue, mainly as it seemed to be that there was little social interaction between the two, as “newly immigrant Irish men...tended to court Irish women, or they didn’t court at all”.⁹¹ Walter’s study on Luton in the 1980s found evidence which supported this same pattern in the town, with 71 percent of the Luton Irish sampled having married an Irish born spouse.⁹²

The growth of the Luton Irish population facilitated the establishment of several cultural organisations designed to improve the social life of the Irish community, which despite their growth in numbers appeared to be widely ignored in the local press. Walter found that there was “a significant absence of direct references to the Irish community and its activities in the Luton News...no Catholic parish news was reported...even major events...were passed by.”⁹³ These cultural organisations therefore “helped to increase intra-ethnic contact” and provided a meeting point for events which were not being covered in the local newspaper.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Wills, *Lovers and Strangers*, p.129.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p.130.

⁹² Walter, ‘Tradition and Ethnic Interaction’, p.273.

⁹³ *Ibid*, p.271.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p.273.

One such institution in Luton is the Celtic Supporters Club, which was established in 1966, with premises opening close to the town centre in 1977. The Celtic Club is a social club which provides a location for the Irish population and took on the home-like, welcoming characteristics of the aforementioned 'Irish pub' for the people of Luton. It is mainly an entertainment-based organisation, running weekly events for its members such as bingo and fish and chip lunches, as well as providing live bands and singers at the weekends, with special events on occasions such as St. Patrick's Day and New Year's Eve. Margaret Conway, who migrated from Dublin to Luton in 1958 and has been a member of the Celtic Club since its opening, emphasised the importance of the Celtic Club particularly for the first-generation Irish migrants in Luton. She stated that "it's very important. It was one of the original places for us to come and socialise".⁹⁵ Margaret also emphasised how the Celtic has maintained its importance as the first generation Irish in Luton have aged, as attending the Celtic club took on a new meaning in her life. She stated "now it gets you out of the house and it gives you an incentive to get out of bed in the mornings...if the Celtic Club didn't exist, I wouldn't socialise as much".⁹⁶ In her view, the Celtic Club is most important because it has always offered a space in which the Irish can interact with one another freely, stating that "if the Celtic Club wasn't here I think it would really have been very tough. Because you feel as though you're mixing with your own...when you're mixing with the Irish they understand you and you understand them".⁹⁷ Margaret's desire to associate more so with the Irish population highlights that the Irish did not necessarily assimilate into British society in terms of their

⁹⁵ Interview with Margaret Conway, aged 91, on 18th March 2019.

⁹⁶ Interview with Margaret Conway, 18/03/19.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

interaction. The value that was placed on social interactions with and around the Irish in their new settlement communities highlights their continued attachment to Ireland as home, and the way in which they managed to retain their identity even after migrating to Britain.

By the end of the twentieth century, it was clear that there remained a need for cultural organisations among the Irish population of Luton. This was highlighted by the establishment of the Luton Irish Forum in 1997. The need for the Forum was recognised by Labour MP at the time, Margaret Moran, as she believed that the Irish population of Luton were underserved, with facilities they did have underfunded by the local Council. The fact that the Forum was set up over forty years after Irish migration to Luton had begun and was readily accepted and utilised by the Irish population, emphasises that the first-generation Irish population had continuing needs which were not being met by the local authorities. This is evident from articles published in the local newspapers which preceded the establishment of the organisation. In August 1997, a local Luton newspaper published an article entitled “Irish need their own facilities says Moran”, in which it was stated that “tens of thousands of Luton people are from Irish families of Irish origin. They have their own cultural activities...but rarely apply for grants from public funds”.⁹⁸ The article then goes on to state that Moran believed the Irish deserved a space of their own, which would be embraced by the community, as the Irish population “would welcome a chance of a place to meet people from their own country for a chat”.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ *Luton News*, “Irish need their own facilities says Moran”, Wednesday 27th August 1997, accessed at Luton Central Library, 04/02/19.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Just one month after this article, in September 1997, the Luton Irish forum was established.

The Forum focuses on the welfare needs of the Luton Irish population and after gaining charitable status in 2001, demand for its services only increased as membership of the organisation went up. It provides weekly welfare drop in sessions during which time members of the community can meet advisors to receive support and guidance regarding benefits, pensions, health services, debt, housing applications and information on Irish Passports. In 2007, a report funded by the Dion committee, an Irish government agency, was published. The findings of this report highlighted that the Irish community of Luton were generally disadvantaged as a minority group. It was found that there was a higher proportion of Irish unemployed in Luton, with 6.5 percent of Irish women permanently sick or disabled, and 2.7 percent of Irish men in Luton categorised as being long-term unemployed in comparison to 2.1 percent of Irish men across the rest of the Southeast region.¹⁰⁰ These findings highlight the requirement for greater welfare advice and support within the local community, hence the fundamental importance of the Luton Irish Forum, which provides services and facilities that attempt to tackle some of these key issues. When discussing the importance of the Luton Irish Forum with its members, it was indicated how crucial the Forum had become for first generation Irish migrants, most significantly after their retirement. Thomas Scanlon, who has been a member of the Forum for over ten years, and was elected as the chairperson in 2014, reflected on the importance of the organisation for

¹⁰⁰*The Federation of Irish Societies*, "Luton: The Irish dimension, an exploration of 2001 census data", p.14, accessed 18/03/19.

people to socialise. He stated “it does affect your wellbeing because you have that thing that you go to, you have the diary marked up...if you haven’t got something I think you end up a bit lost. The Forum helps so many people”.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Interview with Thomas Scanlon, 4th Feb.2019.

Chapter Three – an enduring Irish identity? Comparing three generations.

The works of historians Alison Light and Carolyn Steedman are key examples which have previously looked at family history. Light's *Common People*, looks at how her family's lives reflected the lives of the working class in Britain over two centuries. In this chapter I intend to build on the approach adopted by Light and Steedman, and explore what my own family history tells us about Irish identity in Britain. In order to do so, I have compared three members of my family who are first, second and third generation migrants, to assess how attitudes to their own Irishness differ over time. Light defines family history as having the ability to "individualise what otherwise seems an anonymous crowd".¹⁰² In looking at an Irish migrant family in this way, there is an attempt to assess to what extent these individuals fit into the historical narrative of the Irish who migrated and settled into life in Britain. I will also be maintaining a particular focus on Luton as an example of what the migrant experience was in a typical settlement area, with the town acting as a specific example in the story of migration to Britain as a whole. In this chapter I will be looking at my grandfather and first generation migrant, Brendan Marcantonio. I will contrast his personal perception of his Irish identity with his niece, Sandra Marcantonio, a second generation migrant who was born in Luton in the 1960s. The final person I will be looking at in this chapter is Jay Johnson, who is a cousin of myself and Sandra, and Brendan's great niece.

Brendan Marcantonio was born in Dublin on 11th February 1945, to Mary Christina Corcan and Francis Albert Marcantonio, and was the fifth of ten children. Brendan

¹⁰² Alison Light, *Common People: The History of an English Family*, (London, 2014), p. xxii.

migrated from Dublin to Luton in 1958, aged 17, with his older sister Noeleen and her husband Eddie, their four children, his older brother Albert and Albert's fiancée, and four of his younger siblings. He met Maria Maguire in Luton and they were married in 1962. They went on to have three children together – Donna, Brendan and Jason. Like many Irish migrants to Luton, Brendan found work in Vauxhall motor cars, where he stated “there was plenty of employment, they were crying out for people”.¹⁰³ Brendan's comments not only reflect the post-war demand for Irish labour across Britain as a whole, but more specifically how significant companies such as Vauxhall were in the economic landscape of Luton. Indeed, Vauxhall at one stage became the single largest employer in the town, “employing a fifth of the work force (19,000 and a further 6,000 at the Dunstable works)” by 1964.¹⁰⁴

Brendan, for the most part, had positive experiences in Luton upon his arrival. He stated that “there were all sorts of people here, Scotch, Welsh, the Irish...the only thing that did used to rile me up is that they wouldn't call you by your name, everybody was 'Paddy' to the English”.¹⁰⁵ Brendan's experience highlights that even in a town such as Luton, where the diversity present didn't allow for outright hostility, the long standing stereotype of the male 'Paddy', was something which remained. This stereotype meant Irish men became figures known for “hard-working and heavy-drinking”¹⁰⁶. These stereotypes, as evidenced by Brendan's

¹⁰³ Interview with Brendan Marcantonio, Monday 15th April 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Len Holden, *Vauxhall Motors and The Luton Economy, 1900-2002*, (Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 2003), p.199.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Brendan Marcantonio, 15/04/19.

¹⁰⁶ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.114.

experience, surpassed the field of construction and became a term used to refer to every Irish male, no matter what his occupation.

Alongside Brendan's full-time employment, he was also the lead singer in showband *The Barons*, which performed in dance halls and social clubs across the country, including London, Leeds, Coventry and Birmingham. Brendan remembered this period of his life fondly, enjoying his performances. He remembered a performance during 1975 however, when the atmosphere was very different to the norm, and signified the first time for him since arriving in England that he felt uncomfortable due to his Irish identity. He stated "we played in a great big dancehall in Birmingham. It was the Paddy's Day after the bombings right...when we got there, oh Jesus, security searched you. They took everything out, microphones the lot...it was a terrible atmosphere that year, absolutely terrible, it was just very raw...to be honest with you the manager couldn't get us out of Birmingham quick enough".¹⁰⁷

The Birmingham bombings of 21st November 1974 killed twenty-one people, including nine Irish, and were carried out by the Irish Republican Army (the IRA). This sparked a period of strife between the British public and Irish migrants who had settled in Britain. The day after the bombing, the *Daily Mirror* published an article which stated there had been "a flood of phone calls from English people to police stations, newspapers and radio stations threatening vengeance for the bomb massacre...one group of ex-soldiers...are pledged to organise reprisal raids on Irish building sites and Irish social clubs".¹⁰⁸ A few days later, another Birmingham newspaper article stated that steps in Birmingham had already been taken to seek

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Brendan Marcantonio, 15/04/19.

¹⁰⁸ *Daily Mirror*, "Alert for Avengers", Friday 22nd November 1975, p.28.

revenge, with bombs thrown “at the Irish Community Centre, a Roman Catholic Junior School and two lorries belonging to an Irish-run construction firm...attacked”.¹⁰⁹

The consequence of this condemnation, alongside the significant tension it caused between the British and Irish, was that it resulted in a retreat by the Irish, who became reluctant to engage with those outside of their community. Perhaps the most significant result of this was the fact that the Irish became hesitant to be vocal when in public spaces, with the clearest signifier of their Irish identity – their accent, representing for the British “membership of a dangerous ‘race’, sharing inherited violent tendencies...genetically programmed to support...Irish nationalism”.¹¹⁰

Walter argues that this visible retreat and self-silencing by the Irish was a protective mechanism which indirectly contributed to their invisibility and thus their supposed assimilation in British society, as the silencing of their voices appeared to be a form of acceptance that there was “no place for Irishness in Britain”.¹¹¹

Brendan himself did not feel the need to retreat from public space in Luton as a result of these attacks in the 1970s. In Luton in particular, he said he felt that “there was a lot of sympathy on both sides” in regards to the events that were unfolding in Northern Ireland.¹¹² Arguably, Brendan did not suffer from prejudice based on his accent during this time due to the large number of Luton Irish in the community. He also mainly socialised with the Irish, a frequent member of the Celtic Supporters

¹⁰⁹ *Birmingham Daily Post*, “Bombings ‘a message in blood’ warns MP”, Monday 25th November 1974, p.5.

¹¹⁰ Walter, ‘Outsiders Inside’, p.172.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p.173.

¹¹² Interview with Brendan Marcantonio, 15/04/19.

Club in Luton, which as aforementioned, remains a key social space for the Irish to interact 'with their own'. Brendan also identified his accent as being the main marker of his Irish identity up to the present day, with people still remarking on how strong his accent is despite living in Luton for 60 years. He stated "people say to me oh, you haven't lost your accent, but you know you don't want to lose it because it's part of who you are".¹¹³ To a stranger, Brendan's strong Dublin accent is the most obvious indication of his Irishness and something he has always been proud of.

In terms of Brendan's Irish identity overall, although he still acknowledged Ireland as his home technically, he felt he had no connection to Dublin now, and had no desire to return. He stated that "having been here for sixty years, my children are here, my granddaughters are here, and this is basically home now. Even if I won the lottery, for instance, I wouldn't even dream of going back. Our roots are here. There's nothing for me there".¹¹⁴ The idea of 'putting down roots' in England and thus distancing oneself from returning to Ireland was not uncommon amongst migrants, as evidenced by Delaney's works. The arrival of children signalled that migration to England was permanent, as "raising a family was widely perceived to be a significant determinant in...the inevitable process of 'settling down'".¹¹⁵ Not only this, but Brendan had almost no familial ties left in Ireland when he migrated, stating "I never really knew my father, my mother died when I was fourteen. I came over here with almost all my siblings...there's nothing left there".¹¹⁶ Brendan's

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.69.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Brendan Marcantonio, 15/04/19.

sentiments are reflective of responses by other Irish migrants studied, with the idea that there was “nothing to go back to” featured in several people’s accounts.¹¹⁷ As migrants lived in England for long periods of time, Ireland itself was changing as a society, meaning it had become unrecognisable to many migrants, and “no longer resembled the imaginary homeland which was cherished...they no longer had any wish to live there”.¹¹⁸

Sandra Marcantonio was born in Luton on the 27th April 1962, the eldest of two children born to Dublin migrants Albert Marcantonio (Brendan’s older brother) and Margaret (Peggy) Marcantonio. After Sandra’s birth, the family first lived in a three-bedroom terraced house with Albert’s older sister, her husband, and the couple’s four children. Alongside this, four of Albert’s other siblings lived in the home. A year after Sandra’s birth, her parents bought the house next door to Albert’s sister, and so the family moved into 166 Leagrave Road. Sandra noted that her mother returned straight back to work after her birth so they could save a deposit for the house they subsequently purchased, as “nobody would rent to them, because they wouldn’t rent to black or Irish people- no black, no Irish, no dogs. They couldn’t get a mortgage from a bank or building society because they were Irish, and so the only people that would give them a loan for the house was Luton Borough Council”.¹¹⁹

Sandra clearly recalls the difficulties her parents experienced at the time because of their Irishness. The story of Sandra’s parents in Luton is a case which reflects the discrimination that the Irish faced on a larger scale upon their arrival in Britain. The

¹¹⁷ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.69.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.69.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Sandra Marcantonio, aged 57, on Wednesday 17th April 2019.

industrial towns and cities that the Irish settled in had a shortage of housing after the damage caused by the Second World War. This, combined with the prejudice exhibited by “private landlords who refused to rent” to Irish families, and local authorities who often required “a five or three-year residence qualification before entry to the housing list” meant finding housing was difficult for the Irish.¹²⁰

Delaney highlights that these signs “no blacks, no Irish” or “no Irish need apply” which Sandra’s parents encountered were a common feature of life in Britain during this time period, and “occupy a central place in in the collective memory of the Irish in Britain, often...emblematic of the reaction to large-scale Irish settlement”.¹²¹

Sandra, despite being a second-generation migrant, still strongly associated herself with Ireland and her Irishness. She emphasised pride in her Irish identity, and rejected any idea that she was British, stating that “I’ve never felt British. I have a British passport because obviously this is where I was born...raised and earned my living...but everything about me is Irish. I don’t turn my back on the fact I was born here but I feel much more comfortable with Irish people and doing Irish things and...the way Irish people live their life”.¹²² Sandra’s comments reflect the results of research carried out on second generation Irish migrants in Birmingham during the 1980s, in which over 75 percent of sample surveyed self-identified either as “half English, half Irish” or “mainly Irish”.¹²³ Mary Hickman also carried out several surveys on second generation migrants in Catholic schools in London throughout

¹²⁰ Delaney, *Irish in Britain*, p.110.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* p.123.

¹²² Interview with Sandra Marcantonio, 17/04/19.

¹²³ Mary J. Hickman, Sarah Morgan, Bronwen Walter and Joseph Bradley, ‘the limitations of whiteness and the boundaries of Englishness: second generation Irish identifications and positioning’s in multi-ethnic Britain’, *Ethnicities*, Vol.5, No.2, (2005), p.163.

the 1990s and found that 81 percent named either 'Irish' or 'of Irish descent' as their primary identity.¹²⁴

Sandra attributed her connection to her Irishness to her family and upbringing. She stated "I think my upbringing was hugely different to my non-Irish friends because of our extended family. Nobody else seemed to have so many brothers and sisters, and therefore we had loads of cousins...we were much more social butterfly like than the other people I went to school with...most of the socialising that was done was with the family".¹²⁵ Sandra's emphasis on her family reflects how important it was within Irish culture. Indeed, it was familial ties in which often facilitated the ease of transition from Ireland to Britain for first generation migrants. Not only this, but during the 1970s and 1980s, when public attitudes to the Irish were negative, family and the home environment provided a space in which "private expressions of Irish identity" could take place without fear of prejudice.¹²⁶ Hickman also emphasises the "synonymy of family life and Irishness" in her work, which was summarised by the idea of being "brought up Irish", first stated when Catholic children in London were describing their home life during her studies in the 1990s.¹²⁷ In Sandra's comparison of her extended family's consistent presence in her upbringing compared to the seeming lack of this in the family life of her English friends, she defined her upbringing as being definitively 'Irish'.

Sandra also remembers the social aspect of her teenage years as being very Irish, specifically with the opening of the Holy Ghost Parish Community Centre in Luton in

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, p.163.

¹²⁵ Interview with Sandra Marcantonio, 17/04/19.

¹²⁶ Walter, *Outsiders Inside*, p.209.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p.209.

1977, when she was fifteen. The Holy Ghost was the location of evenings of entertainment for many of the Luton Irish community and Sandra highlighted that it was a prime place for “meeting other people in the Irish community, seeing your family and cousins who you wouldn’t always see...no matter which way you turned, there was always something Irish happening”.¹²⁸ The local newspaper frequently published information of events that were happening in the Holy Ghost Centre for the benefit of the Irish community of Luton, with the centre involved in the town’s Irish Culture Week, which began in 1995. The centre’s involvement with events such as these, and its presence in Sandra’s young adult life further emphasises how important Irish cultural organisations such as this were for the Luton Irish community.

Jay Johnson was born in Luton on the 29th November 1990, the eldest of three daughters born to Noel and Sheryll Johnson, both of whom were second generation Irish migrants themselves. Despite being classified as a third-generation migrant, Jay emphasised that she still felt a strong connection to her Irishness, mainly due to the influence of her family and her participation in forms of Irish culture in Luton.

Religion was a particularly influential factor in Jay’s upbringing, primarily as she attended Catholic schools throughout her life. As previously explored, Catholic schools were extremely important to Luton Irish residents, with some Irish families even relocating in order to be within the catchment area. Jay stated “I went to catholic schools throughout really, St. Joseph’s primary school, Cardinal Newman high school and sixth form. I nearly ended up at a Catholic university as well...but I

¹²⁸ Interview with Sandra Marcantonio, 17/04/19.

had a lot of Catholic influence I guess all the way through...it's nice to have something in common with a lot of people...who have a similar upbringing and background to me".¹²⁹ Mary Hickman argued that "education had been a prime way in which the public mask of Catholicism has rendered Irishness invisible in Britain".¹³⁰ By the 1990s however, when Jay was growing up in Luton, Catholic schools and parishes were intertwined with the activities of the Irish community, meaning being Catholic and being Irish became almost synonymous with one another.

St. Josephs' parish was intertwined with many Irish cultural events which took place in this time period. The local newspaper reported that the first women's camogie team, the female equivalent of hurling, had been set up in 1992, and was located at St. Joseph's Parish Centre. In 1995, the Luton Irish Festival Committee gifted several cheques totalling £7000, with £500 of this going to St. Josephs Junior School and Cardinal Newman Catholic High School, both of whom put the money towards improving their education facilities. Jay also recalls that she participated in Irish activities which took place at St. Joseph's, including "Irish dancing...we got into that as well...I was with a lot of people I already knew and had become familiar with".¹³¹ This shows how central Catholic churches and schools were for the Luton Irish community, not only to uphold religious practice but also to aid the social life of the Irish population of the town.

¹²⁹ Interview with Jay Johnson, on Thursday 18th April 2019.

¹³⁰ Hickman, Morgan, Walter and Bradley, 'The limitations of whiteness', p.163.

¹³¹ Interview with Jay Johnson, 18/04/19.

Despite the Irish influence in Jay's life, her personal identity is more complex because of her status as a third-generation migrant. Jay stated that "I would say I am English, but I've had quite an Irish upbringing and influence... I always tell people that I've got Irish family...a lot of my English friends take the mick out of me, saying you know you pretend you're Irish quite a lot, but I say well I wouldn't pretend...I feel like people always do question it".¹³² Irish identity being questioned in second and third generation migrants is not uncommon, and is because these generations traditionally constitute "a relatively invisible and inaudible minority" which means that "their assimilation has so frequently been assumed...they have been subsumed into a 'white English' category".¹³³ Walter argues this is her works, stating that whilst "children and grandchildren of West Indian and Asian-born parents in Britain will identify themselves within these ethnic groups", the lack of visible or audible difference in second and third generation Irish migrants, can "be misread as evidence that they have no Irish cultural identity and bolsters the view that Irish ethnicity is limited to the first generation of migrants".¹³⁴ Jay's self-identification as English perhaps supports the fact that as each generation assimilates further into their 'host' society, they identify more so with the people they are surrounded with, and feel more of a detachment from Ireland itself. However, Jay's assertion that she has had a lot of Irish influence in her life, suggests that she still holds onto the roots of her heritage, perhaps playing it down more

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Sean Campbell, 'Beyond 'plastic paddy': A re-examination of the second-generation Irish in England', *Immigrants and Minorities*, Vol.18, No.2-3, (1999), pp.270-271.

¹³⁴ Walter, *Outsiders Inside*, p.177.

when interacting with her English friends so as not to be accused of “pretending to be Irish”.¹³⁵

The assumption that Irishness can only be associated with first generation migrants has contributed to the rise of the term ‘plastic paddy’. This is a slang phrase used to mock or undermine someone born in England who maintains a strong sense of their Irish identity or connection to their Irish heritage. Jay has been the subject of this phrase, and stated: “I’ve always laughed it off being called a plastic paddy, you know I don’t think I’m plastic, I like to go out and obviously celebrate St. Patrick’s Day, but...I’m in touch with a lot of my Irish friends and family all the time, so sometimes it might come across to my English friends that I’m being a plastic paddy, but that’s not the case”.¹³⁶ The term ‘plastic paddy’ originally emerged in a study of young Irish migrants in 1980s London, where the term was used to refer to the English-born children of first generation migrants, and represented “the perceived inauthenticity of the second-generation’s understandable identification with Irishness”.¹³⁷ In newspapers during the 1990s and early 2000s, several articles were published which featured the term. The *Evening Herald (Dublin)*, published an article in 2001 which discussed the fact that there were several pubs in England which had “a menu consisting of Plastic Paddy food to go along with the Plastic Paddy drink they are serving”. According to this article, many in Britain, namely members of the National Democratic Party, viewed these overt displays of Irishness

¹³⁵ Interview with Jay Johnson, 18/04/19.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Campbell, ‘Beyond ‘plastic paddy’’, p.279.

as threatening. They considered much of the music played, which contained “pro-IRA and anti-British sentiments...all too real” in their opinion.¹³⁸

Despite this label however, the influence of Irish familial ties for second and third generation migrants allows them to maintain a strong sense of Irishness. Jay attributes her strong connection to her Irish identity to this, describing her Irish family as being “involved in each other’s lives quite a lot, you know going round to your Auntie’s house on a Saturday, seeing all your cousins and aunties and uncles...its very close knit”.¹³⁹ For third generation migrants such as Jay, the Irish influence in her upbringing combined with her birthplace being England, has allowed for a hybridity of identity to occur, in which family stories and memories allow “information and feelings to be transmitted”, in order to maintain a connection to Ireland.¹⁴⁰ Thus, for second and third generation migrants’ “knowledge of their cultural background in Ireland cannot be erased”, whilst Jay’s English accent acts as a marker of her supposed assimilation into British society.¹⁴¹ This hybrid identity created by being born and raised in England allows for “conceptualisation of new forms of identities which arise out of experiences of ‘dwelling-in-displacement’ for second and third generation Irish migrants.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p.15.

¹³⁹ Interview with Jay Johnson, 18/04/19.

¹⁴⁰ Walter, *Outsiders Inside*, p.205.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.205, Bronwen Walter, Sarah Morgan, Mary J. Hickman and Joseph Bradley, ‘Family stories, public silence: Irish identity construction amongst the second-generation Irish in England’, *Scottish Geographical Journal*, Vol.118, No.3, (2002), p.202.

¹⁴² Walter, Morgan, Hickman and Bradley, ‘Family stories, public silence’, p.202.

Conclusion.

Ultimately, the Irish as an ethnic minority group in Britain have been somewhat overlooked, with their whiteness and thus their supposed 'sameness', creating assumptions that they assimilated with ease into British society. As evidenced throughout this dissertation, this was not the case. Upon their arrival in Britain, the Irish faced discrimination not dissimilar to that of other migrant groups, such as West Indians. They faced difficulties in areas such as housing, forced into sub-standard and overcrowded areas as a result of a post-war housing shortage, alongside regulations implemented by local authorities, which prevented upward social mobility during the period of their initial settlement. Alongside this, the Irish encountered negative responses, still being considered as the 'other' in British society, with their accents being the most obvious marker of their difference. Their audibility was therefore used as a tool against them in the same way West Indian migrants' visibility was, in order to make them targets of prejudice and exclude them from mainstream society.

Amongst these problems, the Irish population in settlement communities such as Luton placed particular importance on exclusively Irish spaces. The size of Luton was also important in highlighting the need for facilities specifically for the migrant Irish, as its smaller population in comparison to larger cities such as London or Birmingham, meant the Irish were more visible. The initial example of these Irish spaces was the Catholic Church, which provided a central location for the Luton Irish community to form relationships with one another upon their initial arrival. As the Irish migrant population of the town grew, so did the need for Irish cultural

organisations to be established. These organisations were created in an effort to create a space in which the Irish could interact freely with one another, away from native British population. A report undertaken investigating the Luton Irish population in 2004, found that of all participants interviewed, 58 percent stated that they found it easier to socialise with Irish people, highlighting that this is an issue which has persisted within the Luton Irish community.¹⁴³ These findings also highlight the continuing need for the cultural organisations which exist in Luton such as the Celtic Supporters Club and the Luton Irish Forum, which represent definitively 'Irish' spaces, and hold particular significance for the first generation Irish migrants of Luton, who are now an ageing population.

The large Irish community which resides in Luton up to the present day has had an impact on the lives of second and third generation migrants born in the town. Analysing three of my own family members suggested that Irish identity has the ability to remain strong across generations. Both the second and third generation migrants interviewed still expressed a strong self-identification as either Irish or having a significant level of Irish influence in their life. These expressions of Irishness thus disprove Irish sociologist Liam Ryan's notion that for the Irish in Britain, "assimilation is practically complete in a single generation".¹⁴⁴ The main reason for this enduring Irish identity was the Irish culture that was present within the Luton community as they grew up, and the influence of their Irish family. Although as each generation got further away from Ireland itself, there was a sense of greater

¹⁴³ Helena Duignan, *Luton Irish Dimension Research*, p.22.

¹⁴⁴ Campbell, 'Beyond 'plastic paddy'', p.266.

assimilation into British society, with third generation migrant Jay self-identifying as “English”, however still emphasising that her Irishness was important to her.

Looking at an understudied area such as Luton is valuable as it provides a specific example of what life was like for the Irish. In spite of Luton having a similar economic landscape to larger cities such as London, Coventry and Birmingham, its smaller population size meant that the Irish were more visible and thus, the issues they faced more apparent, hence the action that was taken to improve their circumstances. Overall, Luton gives a greater insight into what the lives of the migrant Irish might have looked like in other industrial towns across Britain which have previously been overlooked in favour of studying their experiences in large and densely populated cities.

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