

Review: The Irish Chaplaincy in Britain

Reviewed Work(s): Welcoming the Stranger: Irish Migrant Welfare in Britain since 1957

by Patricia Kennedy

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Featured Review

– *The Irish Chaplaincy in Britain*

Eugene Duffy

The publication of this book* on the work of the Irish chaplaincy services with Irish emigrants in Britain coincides with a moment when Ireland, with the rest of Europe, faces one of the greatest migration of peoples since the Second World War. Therefore it serves as a helpful reminder of the range and complexity of needs that emigrants face, of the need for sensitivity to their plight and the importance of responding to them generously lest their difficulties are further compounded by their arrival in a strange land. On reading Patricia Kennedy's account of the development of the Irish chaplaincy services in Britain, one is made acutely aware of how issues of economics, politics, law, religion, culture, education and language bear upon vulnerable people who, for whatever reason, have to leave their homeland with the hope of making a living and establishing a family. Practically every Irish family has been affected by emigration across the generations, so it is no wonder that the people of the country were well ahead of the government in offering to support migrants from the Middle East fleeing from violence and oppression. As this book reveals, successive governments in this country have been notoriously slow in responding to needs of Irish emigrants. Responsibility for their care has, until relatively recently, been left to the Church for the most part.

The Church in Ireland has a long history of following its emigrants with a view to offering them spiritual and material support. Ireland's first missionary college, All Hallows College, responded to the needs of Irish emigrants from the middle of the nineteenth century, not only in Britain and the United States, but also in Australia, Argentina, India and South Africa, often following those in the service of British regiments. The alumni

* Patricia Kennedy. *Welcoming the Stranger: Irish Migrant Welfare in Britain since 1957* (Sallins: Irish Academic Press, 2015)

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THE FURROW

of All Hallows did so by joining the dioceses to which their compatriots were emigrating, while at the same time providing pastoral services for all others in the areas where they ministered. In fact, the numbers of Irish priests, religious sisters and brothers, who ministered in all parts of the English-speaking world, were, for most of one hundred years, very significant agents of pastoral care for Irish emigrants adapting to new environments. It is worth noting that they still fulfil that role in many parts of the world and side by side with the official chaplaincy services that have been put in place either by the Irish episcopal conference or by the bishops in the host countries. Kennedy notes that between 1917 and 1958 1,240 Irish priests were ordained in Irish seminaries for service in Britain alone (p.89). These, however, are not the focus of this study.

The book begins by reminding the reader of the harsh realities of emigration in the first half of the twentieth century, with accounts from a variety of academic and official reports, authenticating the extent of the challenges that faced Irish emigrants in Britain. These amplify what generations of students who read *Rotha Mór an tSaoil* and *Dialann Deoraí* will remember of the hardships endured by generations of Irish migrant workers. Although it is sometimes assumed that because of our proximity to Britain and the fact that we share a common language, integration into the host culture should not be particularly difficult. Kennedy reminds us of something we easily overlook, that in Ireland we speak Hiberno-English, which is not the same as English spoken in England, and this has given rise to both British prejudices and Irish feelings of inferiority. Migration from Ireland to England is more than a movement from a rural to an urban environment, even though this is often how it is perceived. Above all, migration is a serious rupture in primary relationships. A street sculpture in the centre of Swinford, Co. Mayo, a town which has seen more than its fair share of emigration over the generations, depicts a mother dressed in her suit, holding a child in her arms and waving goodbye, probably to her husband or young son who has boarded the bus or train on his way to England to earn money to sustain the family he is leaving behind. The poignancy of that statue is a reminder of the deep emotional impact that emigration has on families and communities, of the pain of separation inflicted not just on the individual who leaves home but on a whole network of personal relationships. The impact of these ruptures is well captured in several of the narratives recorded in this study.

PUSH AND PULL

In any narrative of migration there are push and pull factors at

work. The lack of economic development in Ireland through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries always meant that there was a push factor at work. The country was heavily dependent on agriculture, manufacturing industry was greatly underdeveloped and the social welfare system underfunded. Post-war Britain particularly exercised a strong pull as the country rebuilt its infrastructure and housing stock. Nearly one million council houses alone were built between 1952 and 1956. Alongside this and other huge construction projects was a new social welfare policy, introduced following the Beveridge Report (1942). This report 'formed the basis of the Labour government's (1945-51) programme for reform. It presented proposals for a national health service, family allowance, full employment and a comprehensive system of social insurance' (p.22). These proposals were enacted in the National Insurance Act of 1946, the National Assistance Act of 1948 and Education Act of 1944 which provided for a universal system of compulsory free schooling up to the age of fifteen. Such a comprehensive welfare system sent shock waves around the world and its impact on Ireland was immediate. Now large numbers of women began to emigrate to England to staff the National Health Service and the hotel industry. For Irish men and women the neighbouring island offered opportunities and securities that could not be imagined at home. The pull factor was irresistible. Between 1951 and 1961 over 400,000 people emigrated to Britain. Another push factor developed in the 1980s as the Irish economy went into recession and in that decade over 200,000 went to Britain. In just one year (1989) 70,000 left the country, but by now emigration was no longer a phenomenon primarily affecting the Western seaboard, all strata of society were being impacted. Emigration still affects the country significantly with one notable change: now those emigrating are better educated than the general population, leading to the fear of a 'brain drain'.

The Church has a long history of concern and care for migrants and this has been especially well structured since the early twentieth century, since the establishment in the Vatican of an Office for Migration Problems by Pius X. This is now the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, which published a comprehensive document on the care of migrants, *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* in 2004. During the 1930s English clergy were beginning to voice their concerns about the material, moral and spiritual welfare of Irish emigrants in England. In 1942 Archbishop McQuaid established the National Welfare Bureau in Dublin to provide information for those planning on emigrating to Britain. It was a service open to the whole country and was strongly supported by volunteers from the Legion of Mary. In

THE FURROW

1953 the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants (IECE) was established as a body to liaise with the English and Welsh Hierarchy on the care of emigrants. It is obvious from Kennedy's research that the English bishops were sincere in their concerns and generous in their responses to emigrants arriving in their dioceses. In 1955 McQuaid proposed to the Irish Hierarchy that they take a more structured approach to the care of the Irish in Britain. They approved the appointment of Aedan McGrath, a Columban priest, to work in cooperation with the Legion of Mary in caring for the emigrants. They also approved a project for those religious orders offering parish missions in Ireland to do the same for the Irish in Britain. Then in 1957 the Irish Emigrant Chaplaincy to Britain was officially established and the bishops, at their June meeting that year, pledged nine priests to work on the scheme. There were two primary areas of ministry: those on the large construction sites in remote areas (working on motor ways and power stations) and those in hotel work in London. Indicative of the numbers working in hotels is the fact that ninety per cent of the 2,700 women in the Cumberland Hotel were Irish and of 1,550 in the Imperial Group, eighty per cent were Irish. In the early days the chaplains seemed concerned to provide for the spiritual welfare of the emigrants and to provide a listening and supportive presence for those who felt lonely or ill at ease in an unfamiliar culture. Soon, it became obvious that the appointment of Irish priests to parishes with large number of Irish emigrants would be a significant way of addressing their needs and so in 1958 five priests were appointed to parishes in Westminster. Later the dioceses of Dublin and Killaloe took responsibility for two parishes in Luton, and Irish-speaking priests took responsibility for a chaplaincy in Huddersfield, which had a large population of people from the West of Ireland, especially Gaeltacht areas.

SOCIAL OUTREACH

Apart from the spiritual care that the chaplaincies provided, they were also involved in an enormous social outreach. One of the biggest problems faced by the emigrants was housing. It was in this context that the young, energetic and enterprising Eamonn Casey first made his mark on the problem during the 1960s in Slough. He began one of his housing schemes by investing some of his own money with a bank and encouraging young couples to start a savings plan so that through their combined efforts the couples were able to secure deposits on a house. Very quickly the extent and success of his scheme led to his appointment as the national director of the Catholic Housing Aid Society, which had been founded by Maisie Ward. In 1966 he was also a key figure in the

establishment and success of Shelter (The National Campaign for the Homeless), which raised £5.5m in its first seven years and was responsible for housing c. 3,500 families by 1970. He was central, too, in the founding of SHAC (Shelter Housing Aid Centre) which provided housing for families in difficulty. He was succeeded in this work by Paul Byrne, OMI, who was later presented with an OBE for his work among Irish emigrants.

A wide range of other social services were provided in English cities to support the emigrants, which included advice centres addressing a multiplicity of issues. Many of these services were channelled through the various Irish centres including London, Birmingham and Manchester. Practically all of these centres had their origins in the Irish chaplaincy (p.126). The chaplaincy was responsible for lobbying successive Irish governments to contribute to the support of the emigrants in Britain. Yet it was not until 1981 that the first grant of £300,000 was secured. Indeed, it is notable how those in the chaplaincy over the years worked hard in fund-raising, apart from their commitment of property and personnel to the work. One only need recall the efforts of Fr Jim Butler, OMI, who raised £80,000 in 1983 from a thousand mile cycle. Most of the religious orders in Ireland have contributed personnel and material resources to the work of the chaplaincy over the years. The religious sisters did enormous work and like so many women their names are not well recorded in the archives. Often they are only remembered by their religious name, surnames missing. Yet their imprint on the work of the chaplaincy is writ large. Kennedy illustrates the nature of their work very movingly in the account she gives of the work of Sr Attracta Heneghan in Huddersfield, providing pastoral care for elderly Irish-speaking emigrants.

IRISH COUNCIL FOR PRISONERS OVERSEAS

The situation in Northern Ireland and the IRA bombings in several English cities caused serious difficulties for most Irish people living in Britain, irrespective of their social position. The introduction of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, following the Birmingham bombing, in 1974 compounded their difficulties. Many were so self-conscious and fearful because of their Irish identity that they changed their names by deed poll. Even more serious were the miscarriages of justice which followed the Act. In 1984 Cardinal O'Fiaich spoke of the need for some agency to speak on behalf of prisoners held overseas and their families at home. The following year Fr Bobby Gilmore established the Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas (ICPO). It worked with individual prisoners and their families; it conducted significant research on the situation of prisoners; it provided education and public relations

THE FURROW

roles regarding the prison population and the Church's work on their behalf; it successfully lobbied governments for recognition and support for prisoners overseas. ICPO persistently lobbied leaders in Church and State, nationally and internationally, on behalf of prisoners and their rights, culminating in the spectacular quashing of the case against the Birmingham Six in 1991. Due to their efforts, too, legislation was introduced in the Dáil to allow for the transfer of prisoners from overseas to complete their sentences in Ireland, where they were more accessible by their families. Kennedy remarks that: 'Of all the groups and organisations that have grown out of the work of the IECE, ICPO embodies a concept of Christian charity more powerfully than any other' (p.183).

While most of the work of the Chaplaincy was with the Irish in Britain, its members consistently and for decades put pressure on Irish governments to take a more active role in caring for Irish emigrants. It was an issue governments were unwilling to address because it signalled their own failures in providing employment and other opportunities for its citizens. Drawing attention to emigrants was not going to win votes. Due to the efforts of Frs Paul Byrne and Alan Hilliard the Irish Abroad Unit was established in 2004, within the Department of Foreign Affairs, to coordinate the provision of services to the Irish overseas. By 2009 the government was funding these services to the tune of €15.183m, although by 2014 this had been cut to €11.595m. In 2015 Jimmy Deenihan was appointed the first Minister of State for the Diaspora.

The initial work in caring for the Irish in Britain was led by the Church, animated and informed by a Gospel vision and Catholic social teaching. Now that there are no longer the large numbers of religious and clergy to staff and finance the necessary services the baton has been taken up by equally committed lay members of the Church and Government finance is compensating for years of neglect by previous administrations. This book traces the history of the long road that has led to this positive situation. It is an important record of the tireless and heroic efforts made by so many lay, religious and clergy since the 1950s to improve the life experience of the hundreds of thousands who left their homeland to seek a better future across the Irish Sea. It is a very comprehensive narrative told with real appreciation for the achievements of all those who populate its pages. Its publication at this point in European history could not be timelier, as each country begins to come to terms with a new wave of immigrants. Reading this narrative provides a rich stimulus for formulating the variety of responses that will have to be considered if these immigrants are to be helped to integrate into the local communities into which they arrive.