

FANATICS!

Power, identity and fandom in football

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London and New York

First published 1998
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

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Typeset in Bembo by Routledge
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Fanatics: power, identity, and fandom in football / [edited by] Adam Brown.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Soccer fans – Europe. 2. Soccer – Social aspects – Europe.
I. Brown, Adam, 1967–

GV943.9.F35F36 1998
303.6'2–dc21 98–14911
CIP

ISBN 0-415-18103-8 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-18104-6 (pbk)

'ANGELS' WITH DRUNKEN FACES?

Travelling Republic of Ireland supporters
and the construction of Irish migrant identity
in England

Marcus Free

Introduction

24 June 1994: The Dubliner, an 'Irish theme pub' in Digbeth, Birmingham. Ireland's televised second first-round match against Mexico in the US '94 World Cup attracts a full house. This is Ireland's second consecutive appearance in World Cup finals and marks the maturity of a period of unprecedented success for the Republic since ex-England player Jack Charlton's managerial appointment in 1986, the highlight of which was a World Cup quarter-final defeat by Italy in 1990. An estimated half a million people lined the streets of Dublin to greet the team's return in 1990 (Dunphy 1994: 6), and there were parallel Irish celebrations around the world. Back in The Dubliner, Ireland have won their first match against Italy in US '94 1-0 and expectations among the Irish community for a second win are running high. The transmission of American television pictures is mediated by the context of a Radio Telefis Eireann (RTE) programme taken by satellite from Ireland. Setanta Sports transmits a range of RTE sports broadcasts to Irish pubs and clubs throughout Britain, irrespective of their availability on British terrestrial television.

As numbers increase the landlord, an ex-Irish super heavyweight boxing champion, makes a pre-match surgical strike on a self-made 'character' who bursts into song – 'he was pissing on the seats – I warned him'. In a bizarre parallel with the heat and humidity of Orlando (water bags will be thrown to players throughout the match) evaporated sweat condenses and drips from the ceiling. The abundance of youthful English accents signifies the presence of locally bred 'second generation' Irish fans: two are unhappily distracted from the screen and the singing of the national anthem by the slurred speech and

red eyed stare of a middle-aged acquaintance. An argument breaks out about whether opening the curtains will allow more air to circulate or whitewash the video screen. A fiftyish women in tight shorts – 'old enough to know better' – is bouncing her inflated tricolour hammer off the cranium of any man under forty. In a tense match, Ireland play badly and are 2-0 down twenty minutes into the second half. The match is temporarily eclipsed on screen by the touchline delay of substitute John Aldridge's entrance in a protracted argument with an official. The Irish commentator's irritation at the officials' 'peaked caps and self importance' is drowned by 'fuck offs' and 'wankers', echoes of Aldridge's easily lip read anger. Chants of 'Come on Aldo' seem to will this 'third generation' Irish Liverpoolian to score. Aldo, who claimed to have seen 'shamrocks, not pound signs', when asked to play for the Republic – 'embarrassing as shite, that was, ammunition to the anti-plastics brigade' – duly obliges. As the final whistle announces a 2-1 defeat, the hammer-woman announces that 'at least we got through', a remark possibly attributable to the Mexicans' playing in green.

The doors are opened and face painted fans spill onto the pavement singing 'you'll never beat the Irish'. Tricolours are waved at passing traffic who honk replies. An elderly man sits, crying with head in hand. I accidentally tread on a discarded tricolour lighter. Outside the police station opposite two officers gaze passively across. I'm nudged in the ribs by Graham who remarks that, were we face painted England fans we'd be surrounded by police watching our every move. 'Second generation' himself he revels in the incongruity of Irish flags and colours in an English city scarred by the IRA pub bombings of 1974: 'they're thinking, "what provo'd [i.e. Provisional IRA] be mad enough to do this in the middle of Birmingham?"' Three hours later and pavement drinking is still in full swing, the strains of The Pogues' 'Sally MacLennane' is emanating from within. Now on the number 50 bus, having been down to Moseley for an obligatory post-drinking Balti I hear a black boy behind me scoff 'fucking Paddies'.

To some extent this story, and the ongoing ethnography of Republic football fans in Birmingham and London of which it is part, echoes the current proliferation of claims for the Republic's success in football as a symbol of paradoxically post-nationalistic national identity in Ireland and throughout its 'diaspora' (Giulianotti 1996). It is argued that, for a European country with a unique history of emigration, largely to Britain since the 1950s (NESC 1991), the presence of second or third generation Irish players in the team forces acknowledgement of a permeability to national and supposedly exclusive territorial boundaries. The supporter's (committed and casual) investment of time, money, speculation, self – physically and wherever he/she may be – in the fortunes of the team is a way of rethinking migration as 'diaspora', the spillage of genetically bonded seeds from the nation (Humphries 1994; Bolger 1992). There is a post-colonial dimension, too. The promiscuity and profanity of a football fan culture founded on a sport not only of 'foreign' but also of British

imperial origin and manifest in a 'carnavalesque' culture of heavy drinking is easily counter-pointed to a supposedly virginal and sacred 'national culture' blind to the contradictions of its own birth (Doyle 1994; Jones 1995; Dunphy 1994; Cronin 1994).

Undoubtedly Ireland's successes in football have highlighted the 'imagined' dimension to the 'community' (Anderson 1983) of the nation. But do they allow Irish people to see and ponder the contradictions of their national identity or merely reproduce them unconsciously? Do they facilitate the imagination of place-specific variations on the 'diaspora' experience, and the fissures within these variations? How central or incidental is football and being a fan to the processes of national identity and introspection that appear to surround it? In post-colonial theorist, Fanon's terms (1967: 175), is it an uncritical acceptance of the most plastic manifestation of national culture in order to escape the 'swamp [of contradictions] that may suck ... [one] down'? Or is it a way of avoiding both this and his alternative, that is to float terrifyingly above the 'swamp' – 'without an anchor, without a horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless – a race of angels' – by learning to know and live with 'contradictions which run the risk of becoming insurmountable'? This would be akin to *embodying* the contradictions but with the territorial freedom of the 'angel', able now to imagine different identities, to see their comparability or their interconnectedness, not least that which lies between both kinds of post-colonial/imperial subject: English and Irish, being Irish ('first' or 'second' generation) in England. This chapter draws on the words and experiences of 'second generation' Irish fans in Birmingham and London to begin to address these questions.

'Second generation Irish' or first generation 'plastic'?

Is the shamrock-struck 'Aldo' a 'plastic paddy' – a term of abuse used by Irish-born fans to indict the nominally 'second generation' with simulating an identity which is incompatible with theirs because it is expressed through cultural forms unconnected with their place of origin (Rowan 1994)? I quizzed one London Irish fan about his 'real' thoughts on Michael Robinson, the extreme case of a player who qualified only because his mother first acquired Irish citizenship via her grandmother. Robinson had told him personally of his son's Irish flag above his bed, yet publicly proclaimed his renewed English identity on retirement. 'There's supposed to be some pride in pulling on the green shirt and all that. I think it's total cobbler. Pride is within someone else's motivation. They're professionals.' The symbol which helps to legitimate Birmingham/London Irish identities is surrendered to a special status immune from critical discussion of players' 'real' national identities because it's a commodified form. It can't be exhausted in one place or torn apart through its contradictions. Like plastic, its internal elements and the nature of their bonds are externally invisible. Whatever the temporary

appropriation of segments of inner-city Birmingham, travelling fans have no such protection, and the accusations which emerge on trips indict either supposed irrational caprice or a calculated, patronising form of 'English' post-imperial presumptuousness.

A recent report (Hickman and Walter 1997: 20) which 'corrects' the 1991 British census by multiplying the number of Irish-born by three to account for the 'second generation' is problematic for two reasons in this respect: the inability of statistical correction to impact upon embedded perceptions of ethnic difference purely on the basis of colour or accent; and the voluntarism of 'second generation' Irish identity in Britain given the paucity of institutional cultural frameworks and 'ethnic markers' (Chance 1987). The nominally 'second generation' is placed in a highly ambivalent relationship to Irish identity by a society which considers them non-existent as such. Friction with Irish born fans may simply be a symptom of ineradicably binary national distinction, especially given the colonial past.

Such accusations are facilitated by the plasticity of the commodified form in which the football comes readily packaged, a bone of contention for those who consider themselves to be 'serious' fans. Consider these scenes from the climax to Ireland's Euro 96 qualifying campaign against Portugal (November 1995). The majority of an estimated 20,000 fans went on package holidays to the Algarve rather than direct and solely to Lisbon. Many of the group I accompanied spent the night before their departure playing poker in a 'lock-in' pub, delivered to the airport by taxi with a combination of alcoholic anaesthetic and exhaustion such that the experience of travel would be unfelt as an otherwise affecting experience. The holiday resort, Praia da Rocha, is a purposely constructed mass tourist venue calculated to eliminate traces of interference in the idealised corporeal experience it offers. The hotel resolved the problem of local 'difference' by incorporating elements of Moorish architecture into an otherwise undistinguished structure and providing an exclusive provision of northern European 'cuisine': buffets of roast beef and boiled vegetables, pork stews and sausages or cold meat with plain salads. The infrequency of public transport made excursions beyond the five hour coach or train journey to the match in Lisbon a major inconvenience and there was little evidence of local residence outside the hotels and building sites. Thus both travellers and destination were complicit in the 'travel agent' paradox that it acted principally to eliminate many of the features of pleasure-driven travel, if the latter is understood as cultural enlightenment through the recognition and gauging of 'difference'.

The day trip to Lisbon led first to a tour of back street red light district bars, with which one group member was familiar from a previous trip, before encountering other Irish fans on a main pedestrianised thoroughfare. Interaction with locals was hardly 'carnavalesque', thus supporting Giulianotti's (1996) thesis that, by contrast with their Scottish counterparts Irish fans do not feel compelled to dissolve national boundaries in an effort to individuate

themselves from a popular European image of English football hooligans abroad. A young boy busking with an accordion and 'singing' 'olé olé olé' in a calculated parody of an adopted Irish chant was quickly moved on by fans disposing of their change into his Coke can. A group of Portuguese fans approaching from the ferry port unceremoniously pushed an Irish performance artist from his upturned crate. Mobile 'dealers' attempted to bargain with seated fans over 'orientex' watches and other bogus brand name goods. As the skies darkened and the rain came we took the underground railway to the Stadium of Light, a vast concrete oval sporting a dome of floodlit, wind swept rain.

In all the milling about at its base our group was split up. A small opening between some barriers at the 'Irish' end seemed to have no function other than delaying supporters. Only one entrance gate to the stadium was open so that a dangerous crush developed. The numerous armed police ignored pleas to open another gate or at least widen the gap between barriers. On entry, no tickets were checked and an onerous 'search' of fans yielded the various umbrellas which had been purchased a hundred metres away. The spiral ascent into the terraced stadium was again slowed by funnelling into a single opening, followed by edging past already tightly packed fans to the more open higher reaches where three columns deep of police separated us from the Portuguese fans.

A combination of rain – thousands, myself included, had no more protection than a shirt, and in one place, four fans huddled under a sleeping bag – heavy handed policing, dangerous channelling of fans, irrespective of whether they had tickets (several of our group hadn't and entered free) – and of course the result, a 3–0 defeat, heightened the inherent irony of 'Always look on the Bright Side of Life', which resounded around the stadium as the vanquished team hand-clapped the fans. During the match itself Irish singing was sporadic and moans about particular players – hapless striker Niall Quinn and defender Alan Kernaghan (brought on at 2–0 down!) – were audible at some distance across the terraces. As the police staggered fans' entry to the underground, chants of 'Portugal, Portugal' were hard to distinguish from 'Ooh Aah, Paul McGrath'; here was the 'legendary' good behaviour of the Irish fans, bolstered by the news, circulated via mobile phones, that Northern Ireland's defeat of Austria had propelled Ireland into the play-off match against Holland.

The plasticity of the experience was surely exemplified by the failure of promiscuous engagement with local culture and the constraints imposed by the rigid policing, thus directly continuous with Praia. Photography, in this respect, was an interesting motif. One of the fans, too slow to raise a drunken grin for a visiting TV crew, had run after them to try again. The same night another was held for four hours for daring to take a photograph of an armed policeman, the otherwise obligatory sign of the 'carnavalesque' in dissolving hierarchical boundaries, though like the professional counterpart a mode of

reification, of deadening by freezing the moment as permanent and engulfing metonymy. But the plastic and homogeneous exterior concealed to the outsider a degree of heterogeneity within, ironically a function of that plasticity, in turn symptomatic of the magnitude of the occasion and the gearing of Portugal to mass tourist arrivals.

Where identical symbols are freely available, bitter struggles for their meaning are more likely. As we stepped onto the Lisbon Metro the theme from 'Eastenders', a popular British soap opera, was being sung. The singers were fans from Dublin, the joke at the expense of London and Birmingham Irish on the train who were taunting Portuguese fans about their defeat by Ireland in Dublin. Their supposedly unwarranted presence was further kept at bay through a form of mimesis – it was followed by 'Dick van Dyke' cockney accents! As Taussig (1992) argues, mimesis is a primitive way of controlling threatening demons by simulating them. The degree of bitterness involved may well indicate the extent to which the self has already been possessed: the demon caged, 'they then asked each other Man[chester] United trivia questions', the irony of which appeared to be lost on them.

The striking absence of direct engagement between factions here is reflected in parallel incidents in Lisbon and Praia. In Lisbon, 'we're in the hotel and this bloke asks us what we're doing here, probably his first time at a match, and so you start off and . . . the usual. I'm coming out of the toilets. It's him, so I go "how're you doing?" – "You're English!"'

After the return to Praia, on the last night the Birmingham group paid to keep a karaoke bar open all night, nominating each other to sing without forewarning. Local Birmingham club rivalries were strongly implicated in the banter which ensued: the only self-nominated repeat performer, for example, was drowned out with chants of 'Ooh Aah Paul McGrath' (then an Irish and Aston Villa stalwart); 'Bluenose' was an epithet for all Birmingham City ('Blues') supporters. While this playful articulation of place and national identity was proceeding, however, there was some disquiet among Dublin fans in the bar toilets, a focal point of which was the alleged ease with which England-based fans could get match tickets: the forthcoming play-off match would be in Liverpool. This appeared to be a generalised extrapolation from the England-Ireland match of 1991, following which a Dublin travel agent had publicly expressed discontent at the English FA's distribution of tickets to the London Irish supporters club, according to members of the club itself a goodwill gesture to the Irish community in England. It also conflicted directly with the club's repeated indictment of the Football Association of Ireland for distributing tickets through travel agents and its policy, prohibitive to fans in England, of forcing block bookings for home matches including friendlies. Thus the rift between fans was spatialised, stuck in a pattern of projection, of 'plasticity', but without counter-projection because those on whom 'outsider' status is projected have no recourse to legitimated response – to do so overtly

is to confirm that status as patronising *English* fans appropriating this symbolic moment as just another holiday.

'Birmingham/London Irish': a contradiction in terms?

There are two fundamental ironies embedded in these encounters. The first is that such events, for English-born Irish fans, are an extension of their articulation of collective, localised identity via football. For Irish-born and based visitors they are an extension of the displacement of their identity onto a phenomenon rooted in the English football league. But each is attached to a further irony: that local investment in football cannot be articulated to Irish national identity; and that drawing attention to contradictions invisible to Irish-based fans is taken as a mark of aggressive, post-imperial *English* masculinity!

The first was amply visible on the occasion of a pre-season friendly between (Glasgow) Celtic and 'Blues' (Birmingham City) in July 1995. I attended with a group of second generation Irish/Blues fans and Irish friends visiting from London. All had a casual interest in Celtic as well. From morning opening, Birmingham's 'theme' Irish pubs, clustered in Digbeth and around a kilometre from the stadium in a direct route from the main railway and bus stations, were speedily filled by visiting Celtic fans. Some of the Irish Blues fans were deeply ambivalent in their attitude to Celtic, as signified by our drinking in a back street pub whose long Irish associations were less nakedly visible to the visitors: ask them who they'd support if Ireland was playing Scotland and it'll be Scotland, but they'll be singing [Irish] rebel songs up there all day'.

On the other hand being a Blues fan is not unproblematically compatible with being 'Birmingham Irish' since 'Bluenose', linking the club with Celtic's sectarian Glasgow rivals Rangers on the basis of team strip, is a common term of abuse by Birmingham Irish Aston Villa fans, making an imaginary geographical distinction in a city where the Blues' ground is situated close to the main concentration of Irish born migrants. Unbeknown to us, some 'Blues' fans had made an attack on The Dubliner and a minor fight had ensued outside.

En route to the stadium there was a highly visible police presence on each corner. Within, the Celtic fans filled one end with a sea of green and white and the resounding strains of 'Ooh Aah up the Ra [IRA]' and 'Fields of Athenry'. The remainder of spectators were sporadically located with the exception of a cluster of about two hundred Blues fans immediately below us in the main stand. Towards the end of the first half they unfurled a UVF flag, clearly in order to provoke the Celtic end. A row of sideline press photographers spun round and the club chair, Karen Brady emerged to calm things down. The walk back to Digbeth was a hot and sweaty journey through dual

carriageways, roundabouts, under railway viaducts and past empty factories and warehouses. None of the pubs appeared to be open:

- 'it's like Sunday here'
- 'at least Worcester has pubs'
- 'one pub'
- 'one pub in Worcester, there's only one pub in Worcester'
- 'yeah and none in fucking Birmingham!'

It was only through familiarity with a barman that we were able to re-enter, though not together, the pub we had started from, the curtains in which were closed. This was a frustrating day for the Birmingham lads, not least because one of the conversations which ensued concerned *what* they were. Tommy, a Dublin born Londoner insisted that they were straightforwardly Irish but the response was that they were not, that they were 'Birmingham Irish' (Figure 13.1), though this was a verbal assertion which, as the day's events demonstrated, could not be dramatised through a specific cultural form, literally confined to a back street pub. In effect it was a 'double bind' (Bateson 1972): to be 'true' to oneself is to anchor cultural/national identity in the local. In attempting to do so, however, either one or other is destroyed or their polarity is confirmed: silent witness on the 'Blues' stand, combined with invisible and outwardly inaudible arguments refuse the terms of the bind rather than resolving what is in effect a 'power geometry' (Massey 1993) which fixes subjects at various points or forces them to circumvent the pattern entirely.

As to the second irony there is a peculiarly *sexual* dimension to stories of encounters between fans: 'sexual' rather than 'gendered' because of the clustered sub-themes of taboo, morality, corporeal attraction and invasion, and embodied hierarchical power which become 'articulated' to those of colonial invasion. Thus Pat, from Hemel Hempstead, tells of how a possibly apocryphal story of an Irish fan having sex with a local 'in a bar on top of a table' in Denmark – published in the Irish *Sunday World* paper in 1984, with the implication 'that they weren't Irish fans, that they was English' – resurfaced two years later in an argument with a local in Dublin about the right of the 'second generation' to use the label. On using their attendance at the match against Scotland as empirical evidence, his London-born girlfriend was forced into reluctant resignation at the retort, 'don't start telling us you fucking London Irish, I read about you in the *Sunday World*'. National 'difference' is rhetorically marked by the alleged subordination of 'legitimate' partisan competitive motivation and corporeal application to sexual promiscuity, and a conversely metaphorical condensation of national purity and identity into corporeal and sexual purity. 'Diaspora', the literal dispersal of seeds, is only acceptable if neither the seed nor the place of its arrival is corrupted. This 'articulation' (Hall 1996) of the discourses of scandalous promiscuous sexu-



Figure 13.1 Birmingham-based Republic of Ireland fans display their allegiance

Source: Reproduced by permission of the author.

ality, and scandalous tourism through the corruption of place, conjures up a colonial image of conquest as sexual invasion: 'London Irish' signifies the corruption of both the seed and its occasional destinations.

A standard focus of the prior 'corruption' through place in these stories is the acquisition of an English accent, in the tale of sexual encounter it is a frequent guarantee of metaphorical *viatus interruptus* for 'second generation Irish' men. Hence Bob's (Birmingham) tale of ironic tension between the stereotypical embodiment of the diaspora ('looking Irish') and the marker of environmental influence ('accent'):

in Romania, we're in this bar and these Irish relief workers come up to us and say 'well we could see you were Irish lads, just looking at you'. You're fine if you don't open your mouth, then it's 'but you're English!', and you have to go through the whole story... 'well, my parents are Irish and... 'but you're wasting your time.

Not even recourse to sarcasm will reverse this place-specific corruption: 'it's like "yeah, I've spent hundreds coming to one of the piss-poorest countries in Europe to watch an Ireland match 'cause I'm English!" I'm some fucking tourist, I am!' The sarcastic extension points, by enacting it, to the

tacit implication in the original exclamation, that his inappropriate appearance here is a sign of presumptuous 'English' arrogance whereby Irish identity may be co-opted when convenient and in any setting. Perhaps the implication is not so wildly misplaced as, to the annoyance of this same group of fans, several of their self-avowedly 'English' friends were able to rehearse their Irish 'roots' to strategic effect in pursuit of 'Irish-American' women during the US '94 tournament. Whereas the latter might entertain a diasporic connection, however, the same could not be said of temporary Irish migrants without comparable investment in their destinations.

A minor schism was caused in this extended group of friends when a wedding was scheduled in Birmingham to coincide with the Ireland-Romania match in Dublin in October 1997, with the 'stag weekend' in Dublin two weeks beforehand: 'a bunch of English fucking lager louts, that's what we'll look like, marauding around Temple Bar on the piss'. At root here is a reflexive horror of being mistaken for a stereotypically 'English' form of post-imperial aggressive masculinity in a setting where protestations to the contrary were unlikely to be heeded. Perhaps more significant, though, is the disavowal and outward projection of this as a set of 'English' national characteristics. It nonetheless remains in their friends as a ghostly shade waiting to materially colonise themselves, especially given the ritual divestment of childish (and Irish) things through the stag rite of passage.

Masculinity, though, is not a fixed state, but through its contradictory articulation to nationality and national identity a variable quality for these fans. Peadar (Birmingham) describes a disastrous sole relationship with an Irish born woman on a visit to Dublin. Greeted suspiciously by her father as an unwelcome invasive presence, 'on the Sunday morning I said I'd be down at the [local pub] . . . if he wanted to go for a pint. . . . So he never came and when I got back to the house they were all eating their dinner so it was like "well where the hell were you?"' Despite conforming to a customary pre-Sunday dinner drink, a routine among the male members of his Irish family and friends in Birmingham, and common enough in Ireland, he has found himself construed as an arrogant and alien *English* presence first delaying and then interrupting a symbolic family gathering, excluded, but with the blame for exclusion projected onto himself. Yet in another story his alien presence and unfamiliarity with the location – 'before the England-Ireland game in Dublin [1991] . . . we were walking up and down O'Connell Street looking for tickets' – license easy dismissal by 'these two young girls, only that height . . . "what are youse lot doin with your Ireland colours on, you're fuckin' English" . . . They were too young to even bother listening' as they walked away from his explanation. The prior existence of an inviolate 'explanation', the accent as indelible marker of 'difference' makes both the 'possession' of 'English' masculinity by definition an aggressive intrusion and a paradoxical form of emasculation when it masks an awaiting but invalidated narrative of familial migration and complex linkage of nationally confined places.

In a further twist to this paradoxical narrative, while struggling towards Wembley on crutches for the return leg of this qualifying series (for the 1992 European Championship in Sweden), Peadar was nearly thrown into passing traffic by an acquaintance, a drunken England fan from Birmingham whom he had asked for help: not only are English birth and Irish identity doubly incompatible, but the hierarchical status of one's masculinity is context specific and contradictory. Masculine identity may be subject to 'contingency' (Connolly 1991), but variable only according to structural and historical constraints.

Being in two places at once: the politics of irony

So how do Birmingham or London Irish fans deal creatively with their nominal but immaterial places within the 'diaspora', given that 'plastic' in this context connotes only synthetic construction and manufacture rather than flexibility? A key feature of the way in which these fans discuss themselves is the use of irony and this stems from incongruous *experience*. The term 'master-racer', often used to describe Irish-born fans, is a way of re-placing in the perpetrator those characteristics – of presumptuousness and superiority – projected on themselves as supposedly unproblematically *English* tourists. It highlights the ways in which to them Irish national identity has become an exclusive preserve, a post-colonial defensive fortress rather than a post-nationalistic umbrella. But irony needs to be experienced, and for second generation Irish an aspect of this entails metaphorically walking in their parental footsteps, experiencing for themselves, through leisure rather than migrant labour in a foreign country, the construction of the self in terms framed by another. For this realisation that identity does not possess free-standing, immanent qualities, is the mark of a *post-colonial* consciousness. This may take different forms.

Thus at Praia it was noted that the owners of 'Foley's Bar', advertising itself as an 'Irish pub', were actually English, possessing no Irish connections at all, and that the canvas sign displaying the name 'Paddy's Pub' over another bar had been hastily erected (the bar had at least two other names visible on the front and side): 'but that's typical, you know, you put up a sign like that and all the paddies flock in', Jim said as we walked through the entrance. On a rare collective stroll through the town which revealed that there really was very little other than bars and hotels, a teenage boy working on a building site was waving two fingers at us. Stephen remarked that he was 'either telling us to fuck off back to Ireland or that we're going to get stuffed two-nil'. More proactively at an Ireland-Malta match in Valetta in 1989:

the Maltese . . . started coming out with bricks . . . throwing stones . . . and you couldn't watch the game 'cause you were forever looking the other way, ducking and diving . . . and then, after about

five or ten minutes the Irish fans all started singing 'we love you Malta, we do'... and it took the heat out of the whole situation, you wouldn't believe it.

Now this might be read as an example of Goffman's 'front region' (1967), a collective, calculated 'impression management' in accordance with the supporters' club's explicit instructions to members and tightly policed by members themselves. As Peadar noted of a different occasion, in the Italy World Cup of 1990, a group of younger fans who had taken a long route downhill over the roofs of cars were warned of beatings by their elders. But in this case who is the 'good behaviour' for? This is a form of playing the 'fool', a comedic category in which, by *playing* the innocent he survives and thrives, preserving by reserving integrity which outright innocence would deny. It is a kind of self-vulnerisation, a self-wounding or submission to potential wounding, made possible and safe because the full implications of the wounding are not *actually* materialised. The blurred boundary between innocence and calculation makes precise designation impossible.

Such cases are ironic, rather than paradoxical in nature, because paradox is a contradiction, obvious meaning coexisting with its inverse, whereas irony more subtly and suggestively suggests the presence of some other, not necessarily opposite, meaning whose affective power to confound lies in the possibility that it may inextricably, organically be part of that more obviously foregrounded meaning (Hutcheon 1994: 62). Thus it is both 'self-protective' through ingratiation but also 'ludic', making the identity and orientation of the originator the objects of a guessing game (Hutcheon 1994: 47–50).

A recurrent theme in many of the interactions (and second-hand accounts of such interactions) with 'local' people that I have witnessed is a delight in failure of communication as a result either of childish mis-recognition of meaning or ambiguity of self-expression. This casts the visitors as some kind of intermediate category between the innocent and the 'fool' who plays the innocent. Witness this story concerning a hangover-marred excursion to Graceland, Memphis during the 1994 World Cup:

they bring you round in little groups... and you don't really ask many questions, you just listen to them doing their job and telling you Elvis lived here at a certain age, and his parents own this and all of this kind of thing and this girl said 'Has anybody got any questions?', and I said to Nick 'Ask em where Elvis' toilet is', so he says 'where's Elvis' toilet 'cause we're absolutely dying?' and everybody's rolling round in stitches.

In this case the humour hinges on the tension between the *possible* innocence of the question and the equal possibilities that it is a kind of star fandom taken to absurd extremity (the desire to see Elvis' ignominious

deathbed) or a send-up of the guide's worshipful tour of the King's intimate details. In another favourite (possibly apocryphal or exaggerated) anecdote from America, Peadar and friends, garbed in Ireland football shirts, were asked if they were the national team by an air stewardess on an internal flight. Following their confirmation the pilot invited a round of applause from passengers and wished them good luck in coming matches. As Peadar wryly noted, 'Looking at the state of us after a week of solid drinking – I mean Brian's in his fifties, maybe they thought he was the manager or something – you know, we were going to need it [...] You'd wonder, like, if it was any other country would she even think of that.' The characteristic delight in their team's (here indirect or implied) dismissal as no-hopers intersects with the irony of their projection as supporters into the team itself and the inability to distinguish among them as first or second generation Irish. In effect, in their projection into the team they have projected themselves into their own parents' shoes, playing them in their absence and preserving the features of their marginalisation, though in such a way that its comic nature also preserves their integrity because the comedy of the fool smudges the boundary between parties in power relations and makes dual the direction of laughter.

Travelling to international football matches certainly risks the heightening of tensions with fans from Ireland and makes stark the anomalous position of the 'second generation' in England. But reclaiming the 'comic Irishman' isn't simply a form of 'plastic padding' at once desperately defensive and patronising of their 'Irishness'. As Waters remarks of the nineteenth century 'stage Irishman', to which these stories and performances are akin, while he was always the 'boy', ultimately contained by relations of authority, permitted to play – but only insofar as he 'confirmed the stereotype of the happy, child-like indolent Celt' (1984: 55) – he could never quite be fixed by the stare or the language of his English 'betters', there was always some excess.

To play the fool is to recapture this romantic account of the colonial Irishman who exceeds both English discursive designations and the insular designation which persists in Ireland, despite its post-colonial pretensions. In doing so, second generation migrants periodically and without being swamped by the contradictions may give body to the 'angel' born of a colonial construction and which continues to haunt themselves via their parents' uneven experiences of being Irish in England. It is a way of metaphorically being in two places at once, imagining by re-enacting the marginality of Irish identity in Britain through its history of migration while technically being British citizens, so realising the ironic nature of that citizenship.

When Bob was ten, he told his father that 'if you don't like it here [Birmingham] you can fuck off back to Ireland'. *En route* to Liverpool in December 1995 for Ireland's play-off against Holland for the Euro 96 finals, his 'Birmingham Irish' flag was flying from the car window: 'this'll show these

English fuckers'. When I pointed out that we were getting nothing but honks of support from passing traffic he muttered 'patronising bastards!'

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